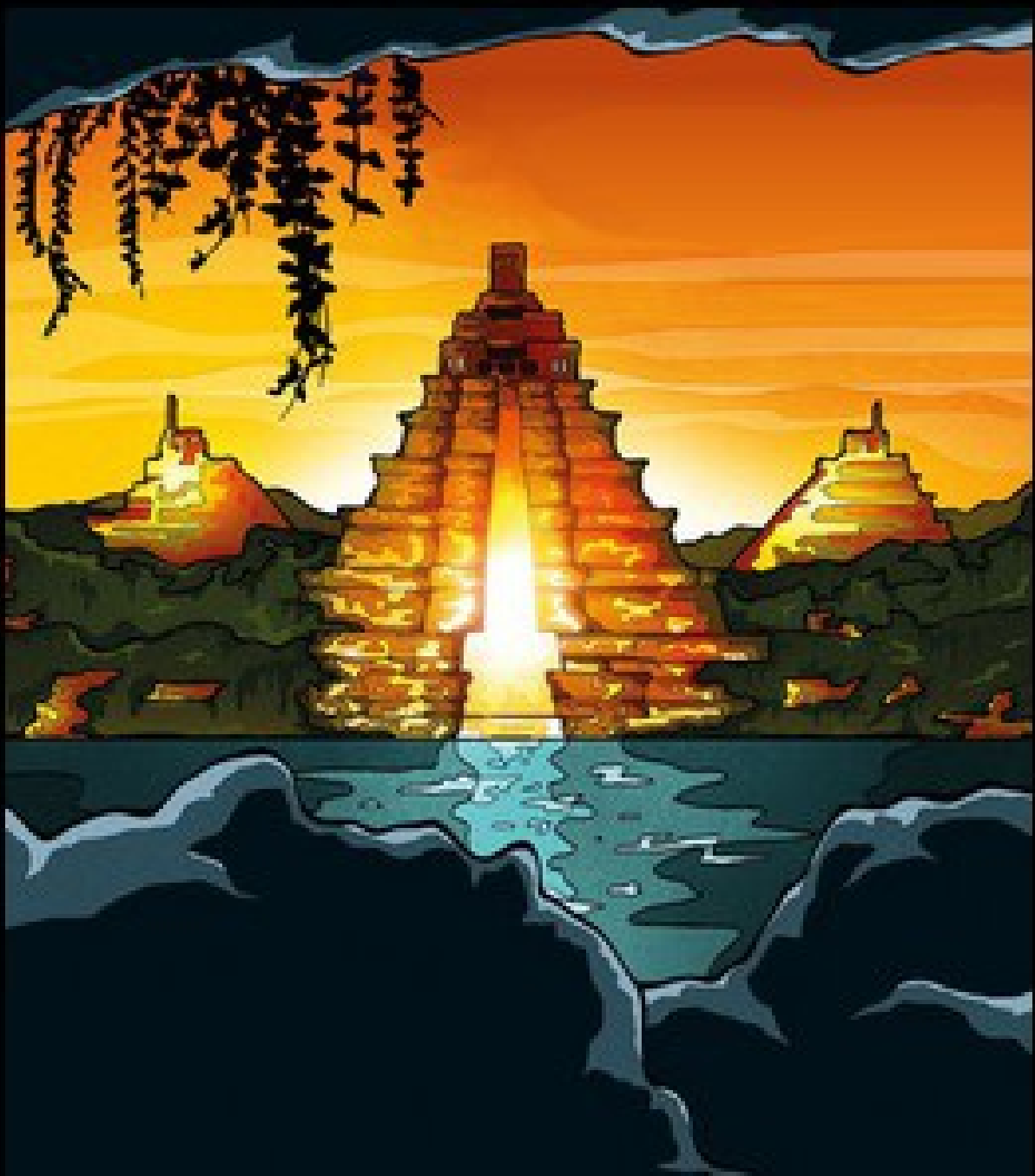


THE INVESTIGATORS in

THE MYSTERY OF THE CITIES OF GOLD





in

**THE MYSTERY
OF THE
CITIES OF GOLD**

An old acquaintance, Professor Mathewson, engages The Three Investigators to recover a set of research documents stolen from him and, more importantly, to find the thief—who is none other than his own daughter, Barbara! The professor discloses that these documents may hold vital clues to the legendary ‘Seven Cities of Gold’ once sought by Spanish conquistadors in the 16th century. The investigation takes Jupiter, Pete, and Bob to a lighthouse, a university, a church, and a monastery—in search of a fabled trove of gold that has eluded seekers for centuries.

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Cities of Gold

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Die drei ???: Die Stadt aus Gold

(The Three ???: The City of Gold)

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1. “My Daughter, the Thief!”

“Juupeeterrr!” Aunt Mathilda’s voice echoed across The Jones Salvage Yard. “Juupeeterrr!”

Jupiter Jones was in his upstairs bedroom at the Jones family home, right next to the salvage yard. He opened the window, spotted his aunt and called out to her, “I’m here! I’ll be down in a minute. One minute!” With that, he ran out of the house and headed to the salvage yard.

Mathilda Jones was on the verandah of the yard office, but she was not alone. Jupiter immediately recognized the man who was standing next to his aunt.

“Good afternoon, Professor Mathewson!” the First Investigator called out. “You want to see me?”

“Yes, indeed, Jupiter.” The man lifted the right corner of his mouth into a half-smile.

Nicolas Mathewson was a friendly man in his mid-forties. He worked at the University of Los Angeles as a professor of history, specializing in the European Middle Ages. The Three Investigators had met him and his daughter, Barbara, in two of their previous cases—*The Secret of the Parchment Book* and *The Mystery of the Feathered Fiend*.

Barbara Mathewson was a rather unusual girl of around the same age as The Three Investigators. She was a little annoying, but the three boys could always rely on her. During the cases she had been involved in, she had always been keen to get stuck in and help with the investigation—which had only appealed to the boys to a limited extent.

“Unfortunately, I’m here for a very serious reason,” Professor Mathewson continued. “I need your help. Do you think you can get Pete and Todd?”

“Bob, sir,” said Jupiter, amused, “not Todd... and yes, you’re in luck. The two of them are here. If you wait a while, I’ll get them. We’ll be with you in three minutes.”

Professor Mathewson nodded, and Jupiter hurried off towards Headquarters—that was what The Three Investigators called the office of their investigation agency.

Headquarters was located in an old mobile home trailer hidden under a pile of scrap metal and junk. Jupiter slipped unseen through the ‘Cold Gate’, an old refrigerator that was one of the secret entrances to their office. The back of the fridge could be pushed aside to reveal a short corrugated metal tunnel that led to the trailer.

It was the first Wednesday of the summer holidays. Jupiter and his two friends, Pete Crenshaw and Bob Andrews, didn’t yet have a case to work on, so they just sat in their trailer, getting increasingly bored as time went on... until now, when Jupiter barged into the trailer and called his friends outside.

Shortly afterwards, Jupiter returned to the verandah with Pete and Bob. Professor Mathewson was now seated at the outdoor coffee table, and Aunt Mathilda was just handing him a glass of iced tea, which he gratefully accepted.

A minute later, The Three Investigators were alone with Professor Mathewson. Aunt Mathilda had gone to attend to a customer.

“How can we help you, sir?” asked Jupiter.

“It’s about Barbara,” said the professor. After these words, he pressed his lips together, looked down and sighed from the bottom of his heart. “I can’t beat about the bush... She’s messed up—a massive mess!”

The investigators could well imagine that. Barbara had always been daring and headstrong. With these qualities, it was easy to make mistakes.

"What exactly happened?" asked Pete.

Without looking up, the professor disclosed, "She first stole my research documents and then my car."

"She did—what?" Bob gasped.

The professor nodded. "You heard right. That was this morning. She's been missing ever since. I have no idea where she is and..." With a trembling voice, he broke off in mid-sentence.

"I can understand why you're upset, sir," Jupiter said. "After all, you've obviously not only been the victim of a double crime, but the perpetrator was also your own daughter. That would throw you off your emotional balance... but we need more detailed information to be able to assess the situation correctly."

"What Juve wanted to say," Pete added, "is actually—why on earth did Barbara steal from you?"

"That's not just what I wanted to say, Pete," Juve retorted, "that was what I said. I just expressed myself a little more selectively than you did."

The conversation elicited a small smile from the professor. "I can understand why Barbara speaks so highly of you. She really likes you guys."

"How nice... we like her too," Bob assured him, "and that's precisely why we don't understand why she would steal something from you."

"I don't either! I mean, she could have just looked at my research papers at any time... but somehow, she chose to... well, I guess I should probably brief you in order."

"That would be very helpful," Jupiter agreed.

"I'm currently researching a historical topic. Quite a bit has already been written about it, but much remains unclear. There has been, and continues to be, much speculation and numerous myths surrounding this subject." He looked The Three Investigators in the eye one by one. "Have you ever heard of the 'Seven Cities of Gold'?"

"The Seven Cities of Gold?" Jupiter repeated. Instantly, he was captivated by the topic.

Pete grinned. "That sounds like something out of an Indiana Jones movie—a legendary place in the middle of the jungle that nobody knows exists."

"—Except it's not from some movie. It's based on real historical accounts." Professor Mathewson took a sip of his iced tea. "I can tell you more about it later. Anyway, I'm researching the cities—trying to find out what's true and what's just a myth spun around it. The documents I'm currently working on—those that Barbara took—are valuable items from the time of the Spanish explorer, Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca. They are irreplaceable one-offs. I borrowed them from my university's archives... and I have to give them back soon. Nobody knows yet that I no longer have them and..." He broke off in mid-sentence again. Helplessness was written all over his face. "What was Barbara thinking? She's getting me into terrible trouble! Imagine my daughter, the thief!"

"Let's start by assuming that she doesn't mean you any harm, sir," said Bob.

"Well, I certainly hope so! Still, you shouldn't expect your daughter to steal your documents and your car and drive off to who-knows-where!"

Jupiter pinched his lower lip, as he often did when he was thinking hard. "I can't disagree with you there. How exactly did she get hold of the documents?"

"She was with me at the university—in my office. That's not unusual. She accompanies me there from time to time. After all, she wants to follow in my footsteps and one day study there too. During her visit—that was about ten o'clock this morning... anyway, she was alone

in my office for a while because I was discussing something with a colleague. During that time, she took all the documents and left.”

“—In your car,” said Pete.

“Yes... we drove it to the university.”

“—And you’re sure that’s what happened?” Jupiter asked. “—That Barbara wasn’t kidnapped along with the documents, for example?”

“I saw her through the window. I was still shouting and she must have heard me, but she didn’t react. Immediately, I went outside and could only watch as she drove off. She hasn’t been in touch since. I tried to reach her several times on her mobile phone, but it was switched off. As you can imagine, this is driving me half-crazy. I can’t think straight anymore.”

“You didn’t go to the police?” asked Pete.

“Of course not! Am I supposed to report my own daughter? Somehow I still think she’ll come forward at some point and clear everything up... but nothing has happened all day... and then I thought of you three investigators. You helped us back then, with the parchment book and that crazy bird-man. That’s why I’m asking you to clear this up—find Barbara and the documents so that I can return them. Will you help me?”

The First Investigator reached into his trouser pocket and pulled out one of their business cards, which he handed to the professor. The card said:



“You’ve probably already seen our business card,” said Jupiter, “and it says ‘We Investigate Anything’—especially one as interesting as this one. I’d love to know what’s going on in Barbara’s mind.”

“That,” said Professor Mathewson, “is what I’ve been asking myself for so many years... only this time, she’s really gone too far.”

The Three Investigators asked Professor Mathewson if they could go with him to his office at the university. It was logical to start their investigation by taking a close look around the scene of the theft. Their client agreed but said that he had to go home to do something. He would come back to the salvage yard in an hour at the latest and fetch them to the university.

“I’m here with my second car,” he explained. “It’s more of a clunker for everyday use. Barbara took my usual car.”

“I remember that—your 1967 Chevrolet Impala,” Jupiter said. “A marvellous car.”

“You have an amazing memory.” With that, Mr Mathewson said goodbye and promised that he would return as soon as possible.

2. At the University

As The Three Investigators waited for the professor, dusk approached, and the sun began to touch the horizon.

"Barbara is always good for a surprise," said Pete. "Our new case sounds interesting, also because we have to ask ourselves a completely different question than usual—not who the culprit is... but why she did it."

"I can't imagine that with Barbara," Bob pointed out. "I mean, what she did was extremely damaging to her father. It's just not like her!"

"You're raving about her," Pete teased.

Bob waved him off. "She can be really annoying... but she's got a lot going for her and she's our friend, isn't she?"

"Of course she is," said Jupiter, "and that's why it's all the more important that we find her soon and shed some light on this mysterious matter."

"Perhaps it's better that we drive there ourselves," Pete suggested, "then we'll be more independent and can stay there longer if necessary... or drive on to another place."

"Yes," Jupiter agreed. "Then you better hurry and get your car."

So Pete got on his bike, rode home and drove back in his old MG. He arrived almost at the same time as Professor Mathewson and shortly afterwards, they followed him to Los Angeles.

There was little traffic that evening and when they reached their destination, the car park was in almost complete darkness.

"That's the Historical Institute," said Professor Mathewson, pointing to a single-storey, elongated building. Only two of the many windows were lit. "There's hardly anyone here at this time of night. My office is on the other side of the building. Follow me."

They walked over worn steps to a glass door, which the professor had to unlock. He flicked a light switch and the lamps flickered on. "Not exactly glitz and glamour," commented Mr Mathewson casually.

A number of doors led off a wide corridor, with notice boards overflowing with notes, and posters of some kind hanging in between. Bob quite liked the somewhat run-down atmosphere. He imagined a lot of people researching and poring over thick old books here day in, day out.

As the professor unlocked his office door, he told the boys, "I have to go to my school's office to check on some records. You three go on in. You... well, you know what you can do. You have a free hand. I won't be long."

The Three Investigators gladly complied. They entered the room, switched on the light and closed the door behind them.

The main part of the small room was taken up by a huge desk with a computer monitor on it and a wide desk chair in front of it. Countless files filled the compartments of a shelf. On the wall behind the desk was a framed old map of Europe. Overall, everything looked very tidy and nothing gave the impression that a theft had taken place in this room. There were no traces of destruction—no wonder, since Barbara hadn't broken in and hadn't had to look for anything in a hurry.

The Three Investigators looked around without knowing what exactly they were hoping to find, so they looked for anything unusual, for any trace that Barbara might have left behind. However, the results of this initial investigation were disappointing—they found absolutely nothing out of the ordinary.

Professor Mathewson came back into the office about fifteen minutes later. “Did you find anything?”

“I’m afraid not,” Bob admitted contritely. “I wonder what could Barbara do with the research documents?”

“I have absolutely no idea! She could have read everything here in the room at any time or taken the stuff home with her. They’re not secret documents or anything like that. All Barbara had to do was ask me.”

Jupiter propped himself up on the desk. “One question, Mr Mathewson.”

“Yes?”

“Could the documents be used to find the Seven Cities of Gold?”

The professor hesitated. “Theoretically, yes.”

“Then perhaps that’s exactly what Barbara wants,” said the First Investigator.

“To find the Cities of Gold?” asked the professor. “That’s crazy! So many people have tried that for centuries!”

“If you ask me,” said Pete, “it suits Barbara very well to try anyway.”

“What exactly are those cities all about?” asked Bob. “Where could they be? What documents—”

“I understand that you have a lot of questions,” Mr Mathewson interrupted, “but it’s all complicated and can’t be explained in five minutes. Besides, I don’t think you’ll find Barbara that way.”

“That remains to be seen,” Jupiter countered. “I already have another idea of where we can start. However, Bob is responsible for the research and we need to know everything we can about the cities.”

“Then I suggest that you, Bob, come to my house tomorrow morning... at nine,” said the professor. “Unfortunately, I still have a lot to prepare because to make matters worse, I have to leave for a business trip late tomorrow morning. I’m giving some important lectures in Vancouver, and I can’t possibly cancel that. That’s where I would have taken the documents and worked on them during the day... but before I leave tomorrow, I’ll give you an introduction to this not-so-easy field of research.”

“So Bob, you proceed with your research and then leave the rest to us,” Jupe decided. “We’ll try to find Barbara and shed some light on what happened. Tonight we’ll start by following up on a completely different lead.”

“—And what’s that?” asked Mr Mathewson.

“Tracing your daughter’s path won’t be easy. We don’t know who could tell us anything about it... but she’s travelling in your classic car—which is a very conspicuous car. We’ll ask around to see if anyone has seen it. Fellas, it’s time to contact some ghosts!”

The ‘ghosts’ that Jupiter referred to, came from a method of obtaining information that he initiated a long time ago, known as the ‘Ghost-to-Ghost Hookup’.

Each of the boys would call several friends to request information or assistance—in this case, it was to be on the lookout for the car. These friends were also asked to pass the request along to other friends or acquaintances. Those with any leads were asked to leave a voice message at Headquarters. This approach enabled the rapid dissemination of the request across

the city and beyond. In previous cases, the boys had successfully employed this method to reach thousands of individuals, who were referred to as ‘ghosts’ since they could be just about anyone.

Back at Headquarters, Bob prepared a standard message with a description of the professor’s 1967 Chevrolet Impala and its licence plate number. Then the three of them took turns to call their friends.

As the Hookup rolled, they waited in vain for a call back that evening. From past experience, it could take a few days for a response—unless they were really lucky.

At some point, they decided to go home to get some sleep. They had to be mindful of their physical well-being to avoid being overly fatigued the next day. They agreed to meet back at Headquarters the next morning at eight o’clock.

3. The Lighthouse

Jupiter woke up at seven and couldn't get any more sleep. He scurried into the bathroom, slipped into his clothes and hurried to Headquarters. He hoped to see the answering machine light flashing, but he was disappointed. There were no messages.

Pete and Bob arrived at the trailer a little later at 8 am. Jupiter reported to them that there were no calls from the Hookup.

"Anyway," Bob said, "I have about an hour before my meeting with Professor Mathewson. Last night, to prepare for my meeting, I did some research on the Seven Cities of Gold. I think it is better that I now tell you what I learned."

"Great!" Pete remarked. "Let's hear it, Bob."

"Okay here goes... The Seven Cities of Gold is also known as the Seven Cities of Cibola. They are legendary cities that Spanish conquistadors sought in the 16th century in North America. The origins of this legend may trace back to 8th-century Spain, where it was believed that seven bishops established seven cities on the mythical island of Antillia. Each city was said to be abundant with immense riches, particularly gold.

"The legend experienced a resurgence in the 16th century following the Spanish conquests of the Aztec and Inca empires in Central and South America, where vast quantities of gold were found. This fuelled a gold rush and inspired numerous expeditions to North America from Spain and New Spain—which is present-day Mexico.

"In 1528, a Spanish expedition arrived in present-day Florida. After eight years of traversing the southwest of the North American continent, only four explorers survived, including Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca—the person that Professor Mathewson mentioned. Upon reaching a Spanish settlement in present-day Mexico, the group described encounters with large, affluent indigenous settlements. Subsequently, similar reports were made by other explorers.

"Motivated by these accounts, large-scale expeditions commenced in 1540 to locate the reported cities, with the hope of uncovering a new source of wealth for the Spanish Crown. However, the explorers were met with disappointment, finding only modest adobe and stone villages rather than cities of gold.

"Ultimately, the Seven Cities of Cibola were never found because they never existed. They were based on a legend born from a blend of European folklore, rumours, and misinterpretations of indigenous settlements.

"So what I have presented here aligns with current publicly available knowledge on this topic. I'm eager to find out what Professor Mathewson has to add to this..."

"Good work, Bob," Jupiter praised. "If you have any questions for the professor, you have to ask him afterwards as he will be off to Vancouver for a few days."

"Yeah... I'd better get going now." Bob left the trailer.

About two minutes later, Jupiter's mobile phone beeped—there was an incoming text message.

The First Investigator promptly read the message. "You won't believe who sent me a text."

Pete raised his eyebrows questioningly.

“Barbara,” said Jupiter. “She said she sent us an e-mail.”

“Really?” The Second Investigator was taken aback, but immediately logged into their e-mail account. “There it is... she just sent it a couple of minutes ago. Listen:

Dear Jupiter, Pete, and Robert,

We haven’t heard from each other for a while... but we trust each other, don’t we? That’s what you have to do now—trust me! Absolutely and totally! You know I don’t do anything stupid. Well, maybe sometimes, but not like this!

To find out what happened, the best thing you can do is go to my house and talk to my dad. He’ll be pretty angry with me. I’m sure he remembers you and will tell you what’s going on.

I know what it will all look like—but believe me, I’m not the villain in this case. I’d love to say more about this... but only to you three. You know how to deal with criminals and puzzles. I need your help as I can’t do this on my own.

We have to meet! However, don’t contact me through e-mail or text, in case I am tracked. That’s why I also cannot tell you directly where I’ll be waiting for you. Instead, here’s a clue:

When we were chasing the bird-man, Bob and I went to this place to get some background on that thing. Bob will definitely remember how we escaped from this place. However, I’m not asking you to meet me there, but in the nearby place ‘where the eye sleeps by day, and wakes to blink at night’.

Okay, get there by 11:00 am today. See you soon.

Yours,

Barbara ♥

“She actually inserted a little heart after her name,” Pete noted.

“—And that’s all you have to say about the message?”

“Of course not! It sounds like she’s scared. She’s writing about criminals, and being tracked. She needs help... and then she provides two clues for us to figure out where she is. For the first, we need to ask Bob.”

“He just left, so...” Jupe said and tapped on his phone. “I’ll leave him a message to call us back urgently.”

“Then there is the riddle,” Pete continued, “a place ‘where the eye sleeps by day, and wakes to blink at night’. When did she learn to come up with riddles?”

“That’s easy,” Jupiter said. “I mean, the answer to the riddle—it’s a lighthouse. The ‘eye’ refers to the light or lamp within the lighthouse. It typically ‘sleeps’ or is inactive during the day and ‘wakes to blink’—to flash at night to guide ships.”

Pete typed a few keywords on the search engine. “Okay, there are four historic navigational lighthouses in the Los Angeles area, located in San Pedro and Long Beach. One of them is no longer used for navigation. That leaves three that fit the clue ‘wakes to blink at night’—which one? We have to wait for Bob.”

Minutes later, Bob called back. “Yeah? I just reached the professor’s house.”

Jupiter told Bob about Barbara’s e-mail and the clues she dropped.

“We went to Comics Number 1—a comic book warehouse in the industrial estate on the southern outskirts of LA.”

“Where specifically?” Jupe asked.

“Rancho Palos Verdes.”

“Got it!” Pete exclaimed. “It has to be the Point Vicente Lighthouse!”

They agreed to keep each other informed—and not to tell the professor about the e-mail until they knew more about the background. Apparently Barbara had deliberately kept her father in the dark.

“It’ll take us about 40 minutes to get there,” Pete said. “Let’s go!”

Moments later, Rocky Beach was behind them and they were driving along the coastal road towards Los Angeles. The sun’s rays glistened on the sea and the waves. There wasn’t much traffic at the moment, so they made quick progress.

The Point Vicente Lighthouse was located at the southwestern tip of the Palos Verdes Peninsula, on a cliff overlooking the Pacific Ocean. As the lighthouse was generally closed to the public, Barbara certainly meant for the boys to meet her at the adjacent Point Vicente Park, which is freely accessible. Visitors could walk the coastal trails and enjoy scenic views of the ocean and Catalina Island in the distance.

Pete parked his car at a large, unpaved car park next to the park. The two of them then hurried towards the lighthouse. Along the way, they only met a few people and when they arrived near the lighthouse, there was hardly anything going on. The summer weather was delightful as Jupiter and Pete strolled around the area.

“What now?” asked Pete.

“Wait and see,” said Jupe. “We have to hope that Barbara will spot us and get in touch.”

At the same time, the First Investigator looked around and suddenly stopped. “Pete,” he said quietly, but alarmed. “Don’t turn around immediately, but there’s a man behind us, maybe fifty metres away. He’s wearing a dark blue shirt and a baseball cap.”

“What about him?”

“I saw him earlier when we got out of the car.”

Pete put his hands to the back of his head, massaged the back of his neck and moved his upper body slowly back and forth as if he were exercising. “I can see him... and... he’s probably going for a walk.”

“—But now he’s stopped. He’s keeping his distance.”

“You mean he’s following us? But why? Why would he—” Pete broke off in mid-sentence because now the stranger turned away, as if he didn’t want Pete to see his face.

“Goodness! I think you’re right, Jupe. Something is not right! I wonder if he’s here for Barbara as well?”

“Maybe we should—”

Jupiter didn’t get round to finishing his sentence. A figure appeared a little way behind the man and hurried towards the two investigators. It was a brown-haired girl—Barbara!

“Quick!” said Pete. “We have to get to her!” The two boys ran towards Barbara, but the strange man did as well... and he was much closer to her!

4. Cabeza de Vaca

Bob was sitting on the couch in the professor's living room.

Lay open on Bob's lap was one of the books about the Seven Cities of Gold. The open double-page spread depicted an ancient city featuring stepped pyramids and buildings that could be palaces or temples, distinguished by intricate detailing. The structures exhibit multiple levels, each contributing to a magnificent and golden architectural complex.

Mr Mathewson pointed to the drawing. "This is anything but a correct illustration. It is important not to interpret it as depicted here. The authors of this book have allowed their imaginations to spiral out of control. Finding even a shred of truth in these tales has become exceedingly challenging."

"—But you succeeded?"

The professor grinned and put down the tray with two glasses and a carafe of water with some lemon slices in it. He sat down next to Bob, grabbed a cushion and pushed it behind his back before leaning against it.

"Let's put it this way—I'm trying. That's the standard I set myself as a serious historian—to find historical facts and interpret them appropriately. In tricky areas of research such as the Cities of Gold, you can only get close to the truth." He took back the book from Bob, closed it, and put it to one side. "If the seven cities exist or existed, then nobody knows what the buildings looked like."

"—But you believe that the cities exist?" Bob asked.

The professor laughed. "Well, that's the big question. I'm convinced of it, yes... but not like it would be in a Hollywood adventure movie—no chests full of gold coins and certainly no towers made of pure gold. What would that have been good for? And how would it even have been possible to construct such buildings?"

"That's a very good point, sir," Bob remarked, "but how come many people at that time spread such reports?"

"I'd best start at the beginning... and please stop me if I get carried away with my research and give you a boring lecture."

Bob grinned, thinking of Jupiter. "Oh, I have experience with that."

The professor provided a comprehensive overview of the current state of research on the topic, in particular, he focussed on Cabeza de Vaca. Bob recognized a strong alignment with his findings from the previous night; however, he was keenly interested in the professor's interpretation. Anyway, it was anything but a boring lecture. Bob was immersed in a time five hundred years ago, and he imagined what it must have been like for people back then.

Eventually came the part of the lecture which was based on the professor's own hypothesis: "Here's my guess—Cabeza de Vaca finally reached villages where corn was grown. There was a good harvest and nobody had to go hungry. This seemed prosperous to him and he spoke of 'cities of gold' in reference to the gold-coloured corn fields. At that time, corn must have been worth more to him than gold."

"That seems very plausible," said Bob. "What do you want with gold when you're starving? You can't eat it."

“Exactly! After Cabeza de Vaca’s return and as a result of his reports, the stories quickly took on a life of their own and developed further. The cities were never found, but the rumour persisted...

“Over the centuries, people imagined this or that—golden towers in the desert or a golden temple complex in the middle of the jungle, overgrown with lush greenery, surrounded by snakes and predators that attack brave archaeologists... all the kind of nonsense you could make an adventure movie out of.”

Bob poured himself a drink and took a sip. “So, what exactly are you working on now, Professor? What documents did Barbara take?” Perhaps he could make some progress this way and actually find a reason why she had done it—because that was the most pressing question at the moment.

“I tried to trace Cabeza de Vaca’s path in his later life...” said the professor, “and also the developments after his death—that is, I tracked down his descendants and looked for sources on their whereabouts to find out what they thought about their ancestor and the stories about the Seven Cities of Gold... and whether Cabeza de Vaca might have left them something that could give us more information.

“To cut a long story short, these descendants did indeed pass down clues about the cities from generation to generation. The most explosive piece was probably a map showing the way to the cities themselves—a route map, so to speak.”

“So actually to the...” Bob paused and thought about how to put it, “... to the corn villages?”

“That’s exactly what I believe! But as I said, many believed and still believe that it was really about cities of gold. Anyway, the trail of this route map eventually disappeared. I traced it to the end of the 19th century.”

“Hmm... so you are keen to locate the map as that might just tell you whether the treasure is gold... or corn!”

“In a way, yes,” the professor said.

“Cibola... the Cities of Gold...” Bob mused, “or the ‘Cities of Cornfields’!”

“Very well put, Bob,” the professor praised. “When Los Angeles was founded—that was in 1781—Cabeza de Vaca’s descendants moved there, and I am convinced that they had the map with them... but in the ever-growing juggernaut of the city, the traces have almost disappeared within a few generations. There are no complete records, no systematically kept birth lists and so on. Believe me, I’ve searched all kinds of sources, but I haven’t found anything.”

“—And the documents that Barbara took are connected to the descendants and the map?” Bob surmised.

The professor nodded. “They’re old documents and letters that I borrowed from the university archives ten days ago. These items are not accessible to everyone—a student, for example, could not borrow them because they are originals, but as a professor, I can. I would have to return them soon—in a week, to be precise, when I get back from my lecture tour. If I don’t do that, it will be a real problem for me. I haven’t reported the loss yet.” He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand.

“We’ll do our best to get them back,” Bob tried to reassure the professor. “Barbara really took everything?”

“Everything,” said Mr Mathewson. “I had the documents kept in my office, in an unlocked cupboard there. Yes, that was perhaps careless of me, but seriously, it never occurred to me that someone could take those documents... let alone my own daughter...”

“Could they be sold?” asked Bob. “Is there a collectors’ market for such documents?”

“No. They were originals, but not particularly valuable in a financial sense—nothing that a thief could cash in on... but the documents are irreplaceable for my research into the Cities of Gold.”

“You had the documents for ten days,” Bob recalled. “Have you read everything in that time?”

“Most of it.”

“—And did you gain any special insights? About the map to Cibola, for example?”

“It’s all very complicated,” explained the professor. “I’ve only studied everything superficially so far because I also had to prepare my lectures. You know, you might still be able to recognize the original text in old letters that have been crossed out; you can straighten out creases, the structure of the paper can provide information, or there is a watermark that...” The professor interrupted himself. “Do you see? I’m already getting back into lecturing.”

“—But that’s exciting!” Bob assured him. He was on fire after this tip. “I’ve often examined old documents myself. That’s great!” Nevertheless, Bob’s head was already spinning from all the information.

Mr Mathewson looked at his watch and said that he would have to leave in half an hour at the latest. “I don’t like leaving you all alone with this,” he emphasized.

“We’ll take care of everything and find Barbara,” Bob reassured him.

5. A Box of Documents

Pete tried to run even faster—but he realized that the stranger would reach Barbara first. The guy was almost there. Goodness! Why wasn't anyone else around?

Now Barbara also noticed the stranger. She turned abruptly and disappeared behind a small utility building, with the man following behind. In a split-second, Pete lost sight of her and then of the pursuer.

It took what felt like an eternity for Pete to get round the building as well. The stranger caught up with Barbara at that precise moment and grabbed her by the arm. Barbara refused to be intimidated. She whirled round and kicked him in the knee. Pete heard him cry out. Barbara got free and immediately ran off again... but the pursuer sprinted on as well.

"Hold on, I'm coming!" shouted the Second Investigator and added a "Help!" as loudly as he could. There had to be people somewhere nearby!

Just then, a car turned into the road, squealing. It was a silver Buick and it sped past Pete. The Second Investigator waved hastily and repeated his call for help. Hopefully the driver would stop.

There was no way the pursuer was going to grab Barbara by the roadside and—yes, what was he going to do? Was he going to kidnap her? Pete didn't have time to think. Everything happened so quickly. Gathering every bit of strength left in him, he ran on.

About a hundred metres ahead of him, the pursuer bumped into Barbara. She staggered and stumbled on the pedestrian path, barely managing to break her fall with her hands. In a split-second the man grabbed her.

The car stopped with screeching tyres. Very good! Pete would soon be there too and...

What was that? The pursuer pulled open the back door of the car and pushed Barbara inside. Goodness! The pursuer and the driver were in cahoots! Then, the pursuer also jumped into the car and slammed the door shut. The car immediately sped off, far too fast on the narrow road.

Pete rushed after it, but he had no chance. The car turned into a side street, and by the time the Second Investigator reached the junction, he could only see the car far ahead of him—impossible to catch up with. Pete stopped, panting, leaned forward and rested his hands on his thighs.

He heard footsteps. Jupiter approached. "The licence plate, Pete. Did you see it?"

"Sure," Pete pressed out breathlessly.

"—And?"

"—Completely covered in dirt... and that was certainly no coincidence."

"You're probably right," said Jupiter in frustration, "and the kidnappers escaped with Barbara... but there's something else that was definitely not a coincidence."

"Namely?"

The First Investigator held out his hand, and only now did Pete realize that his friend was holding something—something with a strap dangling from it. It was a pouch for wearing around the neck. "Since I only know one person who uses something so old-fashioned, I'm convinced that—"

“Of course,” Pete interrupted. “I’ll eat my cap if it’s not Barbara’s pouch. Where did you get it?”

“You ran past it—as did the pursuer. Barbara undoubtedly dropped the pouch as she fled... and there’s only one possible reason for that.”

“Well,” said Pete. “I can think of two.”

Jupiter raised his eyebrows with interest.

“One—there’s a bomb in there that’s about to go off and Barbara wanted to get to safety.”

“Are you serious?”

Pete grinned. “Nope. So let’s agree on number two—Barbara wanted us to find her pouch.”

“Right on... and that probably also means that she knew, or at least suspected, that this man would kidnap her. The question is what’s in the pouch.”

“Open it right now!” demanded the Second Investigator.

Jupiter weighed the small, brown pouch in his hand, examined it closely and felt it carefully. “Better safe than sorry.”

“Yeah, there might still be a bomb in there,” Pete quipped.

“Rather, we might destroy something...” Jupiter said, “but there’s nothing particularly obvious on the outside.”

The First Investigator opened the pouch by undoing a loop from a button. There were several things inside. The first thing Jupiter noticed was a very neatly folded five-dollar banknote. Next was a pencil and a thin notepad, which was completely empty. There was also a photo of Barbara herself, beaming confidently into the camera. Finally, Jupiter found a key with a tag that said ‘Sunlight Motel’ and on the reverse side was handwritten ‘Room 214’.

“Bingo!” Jupiter said. “I’ll eat your cap if Barbara hasn’t rented a room at the Sunlight Motel and wants us to have a look in there.”

“You’re not eating my cap,” Pete quipped. “Get your own.”

The address of the motel was printed on the key tag. A glance at the online map on Juve’s mobile phone showed him that, as expected, the motel was not far away from where they were.

“I bet that Barbara has a room with a view of the sea,” said Pete, “and therefore of the lighthouse and the park. She could see everything from her room and see us arriving.”

“—And that without being discovered herself,” added the First Investigator. “Pretty clever of her for a start, but as it turned out, her pursuers were already here waiting for her to show herself. Unfortunately, they were quicker than us.”

The two boys entered the motel lobby. A young woman was sitting behind a small reception desk, bored and typing on her mobile phone. She looked up. “Yeah... how can I help you?” she mumbled without opening her mouth properly.

“We’re just going to our room,” Jupiter said and held up the room key.

“All good!” was the reply before she turned her attention back to her mobile phone and squeezed out a “Didn’t recognize you” between her teeth.

A staircase led upstairs. The steps were dirty and creaked, and the walls urgently needed to be painted. As expected, Room 214 was on the second level. Jupiter used the key to open the door.

The room looked just as shabby as the rest of the motel. There was a partially torn and rather ugly tiled wallpaper in bright colours, as had been fashionable decades ago. The

wardrobe and the simple chair at the window had also seen better days. The blanket lay neatly on the mattress and the pillow was leaning against the wall.

Jupiter pointed to it. "We probably turned up earlier than Barbara expected. Even so, she was obviously already sitting there watching the park. That's why she came to us so quickly."

Pete went to the wardrobe, put his hand on the handle, but didn't open it. "I kind of feel like I'm prying into her privacy."

"Sure—but she sent us the room key and obviously wanted exactly that," said Jupiter.

The Second Investigator nodded and pulled open the wardrobe door. There were a few T-shirts hanging on a clothes rail and a small travelling bag underneath. The compartments at the side were empty—except for one, which contained a cardboard box. Pete took it out. As the box was open at the top, he was able to take a look inside. "Looks like this is it!" The Second Investigator placed the box on the bed.

Jupiter took out a card from a plastic sleeve stuck on the side of the box. The card had the university's crest and below it was written 'K35-RE3-11-77'.

"Obviously these are the documents that Professor Mathewson borrowed," the First Investigator said with satisfaction. "The only question is what—"

He didn't get round to completing his question as his mobile rang. "It's probably Bob..." He mumbled, fished the phone out of his trouser pocket and answered the call, "Yes?"

"It's me... Barbara," a clipped voice rang out.

Surprised, Jupiter immediately switched on the speakerphone so Pete could listen in. "Barbara! Where are you? Are you all right?"

"Yes, yes, I am. They've kidnapped me."

"Where are you?"

"I don't know. They blindfolded me and took me somewhere... but I'm fine. They didn't hurt me. All right. I'm just annoyed! Darn, I shouldn't have—"

"Tell him!" snarled a raspy voice in the background.

"Okay, I... Yes, all right," said Barbara. "So, listen up... These guys have no interest in me—only in the documents I took from my father. They've agreed to an exchange. If they get the documents, they'll release me. Do you know where you can find them?"

"Yes," said Jupiter. He didn't mention that the box was right in front of him.

"Good, I believe you'll need some time to get them. How quickly do you think it will take? By tomorrow?"

Jupiter realized immediately that Barbara wanted to buy them some time. "Yes, that could work. Where can a handover take place?"

"I'll tell you later," the raspy voice interrupted him through the phone. "You've got three hours, got it?"

"I don't know if we can find them that quickly." Jupiter would have liked more time so that they could think everything through and develop a plan.

"Then hurry up! You get back in the area around the lighthouse in three hours. Then I'll call you and explain how the handover will take place."

"We'll hurry, but I can't assure you that—"

"All right, two hours then," said the raspy voice in a spiteful tone. A choppy laugh followed, then the line buzzed.

"Hung up," Pete stated the obvious. "What do we do now?"

"We only have two hours," Jupiter said thoughtfully. "You call Bob. Tell him what happened, and ask him to come here as soon as possible. I'll take photos of all the documents so that we can at least have a copy if we have to hand in the originals."

"—If we have to?" Pete repeated. "We have to, for Barbara's release!"

“Maybe we can think of a better way.” Jupiter pinched his lower lip thoughtfully. “Maybe Barbara does know where she’s been taken and gave us a hidden clue during the conversation. After all, she doesn’t seem particularly frightened and wanted to buy us some time.”

“Typical Barbara,” said Pete. “That suits her.”

Jupiter nodded. “Maybe we can outwit the kidnappers by handing over forgeries instead of the real documents.”

“—And where are you going to get forgeries so quickly?”

“No idea,” Jupiter admitted. “In any case, we need to think carefully, but for now, call Bob.”

Without wasting any more time, the First Investigator examined the contents of the cardboard box. He found that all the original documents and letters were in Spanish, which was expected. Notably, the university had undertaken the effort to translate them into English and attached the translations to the originals. This was a significant advantage, as Jupiter, despite having a general proficiency in Spanish, recognized the complexities involved in understanding texts from centuries past. Historical documents often posed substantial challenges due to archaic language, unique handwriting styles, and the need for historical context, making their translation a demanding and specialized task.

Jupiter set about photographing the documents page by page with his mobile phone. He was so focussed that he could barely hear what Pete was saying to Bob.

“Hey, Juve,” Pete’s voice snapped him out of his thoughts. “Bob is on his way right now.”

“Call him again! Tell him to bring our investigation kit. We might need some gadgets in there. We should be prepared for various outcomes.”

Pete grinned. “Already done. We have already decided on that without you telling us.”

Jupiter grinned. “—Not that I ever doubted your ingenuity.”

6. Handover

After making a brief stopover at Headquarters to get their investigation kit, Bob made his way to Barbara's motel room in record time.

Immediately, The Three Investigators racked their brains as to how they could get an advantage out of a situation that was as muddled as it was dangerous.

"Let's face the facts," Jupiter finally said. "We have to fulfil the demand by handing over the documents so that the kidnappers release Barbara."

"—Hopefully," the Second Investigator added.

"We have to assume that..." Jupiter paced back and forth in the room, which meant he could only take two or three steps before he had to turn round. He felt like a predator in a cage... and there was little time left! "—But we should try to somehow take advantage of the handover situation. My suggestion is that I hand over the documents and you, Bob, wait hidden in your car. Maybe the kidnappers will come back in a car. Then I'll try to attach a transmitter somehow... and you track their car."

"What if we now hide a transmitter among the documents?" asked Pete.

"Very risky," said Bob, "but worth considering."

"What about the box then?" The Second Investigator grabbed the currently empty box. He turned it round in all directions and finally looked inside. "Yes, right here!" He snapped his fingers. "See?" On one of the corners, the cardboard pieces overlapped slightly as some of the glue had come off. "We'll peel the cardboard a bit to the side here to make room for the transmitter. Then we push the cardboard back down and that's a perfect hiding place. Finally, we'll pack everything back inside and—"

"Not exactly perfect," the First Investigator interjected, "but hopefully adequate."

The Second Investigator rolled his eyes. "Not a surprising comment coming from you in response to ideas that are not yours."

"Thank you."

"That wasn't meant as a complement."

"Anyway, we should follow both plans," Jupiter said. "We use two transmitters and attach one to the box in advance and the second—if possible—to the car during the handover... Bob, have you brought all our equipment?"

"From fingerprint powder to a surveillance camera, our investigation kit is in the back seat of my Beetle. I'm parked nearby." Bob rushed off to bring the kit into the room.

Less than ten minutes later, Pete went to work to hide the smallest of their transmitters as inconspicuously as possible in the box. When the box was with criminals later, its position would show up on the receiver as long as the transmitter was within range. With a bit of luck, the boys would be able to follow the criminals at a sufficient distance without being seen themselves.

The friends tossed around more ideas without coming up with anything really feasible... and finally—exactly one hour and fifty-six minutes after the first call—Jupiter's mobile phone rang again, and he immediately answered it.

"It's me..." It was Barbara.

"Barbara! Is everything—"

“Yes, everything’s fine. I’m fine.”

“Enough!” the raspy male voice interrupted again. “Now, boys, let’s get down to business. Have you got the documents?”

“Everything is here. We hurried and with some effort, we were therefore able to—”

“I’m not interested! We’ll do it like this—the three of you stand by the side of the road nearest to the lighthouse, on the park side. It’s very simple. You’ve got all the stuff with you. I’ll drive the car to you; you give me the documents. You should be able to manage that, shouldn’t you? Neither of us will cause the other any problems. Five minutes later, your dear friend will come running to you. After that, we’ll never see or hear from each other again. All’s well that ends well. Agreed?”

“No,” Jupiter stated in a matter-of-fact manner. “Who can guarantee me that you will actually release Barbara when you have what you want? I suggest a simultaneous handover—like a prisoner exchange, so to speak.”

The kidnapper laughed. “Forget it. We’ll do it exactly as I just said.”

“—But...”

“You listen to me carefully now, buddy! Firstly, I’m not the least bit interested in your girlfriend. I want the documents, nothing else. Secondly, she’s already annoying me with her non-stop chatter. I’ll do a happy dance when I get rid of her. Once again—I want the documents, nothing else. So stand by the road and know what you have to do. No discussion. When will you be there? Five minutes? Ten?”

Jupiter thought feverishly. He had to give in if he wanted to free Barbara. The way the kidnapper described it, it would hardly be possible to attach a second transmitter to the car or to try some other spontaneous trick.

“So?”

“Fifteen minutes,” said the First Investigator. “We need that long to—”

“Agreed... and no tricks! If I spot the police, I won’t turn up and you’ll never see your friend again. I’m warning you—I can smell police officers coming from a long way off. Got that? And for the record, I want to see all three of you guys standing there by the road, lined up next to each other like ducks in a row. Don’t attempt to follow me in a car. No foolishness. Is that clear?”

“Perfectly clear,” said Jupiter. “We just want our friend safe. That’s more important than any old documents that aren’t worth anything anyway.” He only said the last sentence to check the other man’s reaction... but there was none.

“That sounds reasonable,” was all the kidnapper said. “By the way, there are only fourteen minutes left of your fifteen minutes. Any more questions?”

“None.”

The mobile phone beeped. The kidnapper had hung up.

“Uh... fellas,” Pete said. “Did you notice something peculiar with what the scoundrel said?”

“What?” Bob asked.

“Bob was not here when they kidnapped Barbara, so how did they know that there are three of us?”

“Hmm... good observation,” Jupiter commented. “We’ll keep that in mind, but first we have to prepare for the handover.”

Pete took the box with the documents in which the small transmitter was already hidden as well as possible. Nobody would notice the device at first glance... but in a conscientious search, it couldn’t remain hidden for long and the kidnappers had foolishly proved to be very

suspicious during the phone call. The Three Investigators could only hope that everything would go well.

They waited nervously for a while before leaving the room. In fact, it only took them two minutes to reach the place where the handover was to take place.

Pete and Bob planned to rush to the Beetle immediately and take up the chase using the receiver as soon as the kidnappers had left with the documents. Jupiter would stay with Barbara.

A few minutes before the agreed time, The Three Investigators took up position together on the roadside. Every now and then a car whizzed past, but there wasn't much traffic overall. The park, on the other hand, was now lively with people.

"Could that Buick be it?" Bob pointed to the left and his friends immediately recognized the car that had been used to kidnap Barbara just a few hours ago.

A few seconds later, the car stopped with the passenger side facing The Three Investigators. The windscreen was down. Only the driver was in the car and was now leaning over towards the boys. He was wearing a light grey cloth cap pulled down low, hiding all his hair, and oversized black sunglasses such that they could hardly see anything of his face. He was also wearing a dark jumper and jeans.

"Put the documents on the seat," the kidnapper called out. "Then you'll get your girlfriend back in five minutes, as promised."

Jupiter stepped forward with the box in his hands. Pete went with him—he wanted to try to attach the second transmitter to the car inconspicuously by allegedly stumbling and catching himself on the bodywork.

The kidnapper stopped him, shouting, "Only the fat one. The rest of you stay back!"

Pete grudgingly obeyed. Jupiter reached in through the window, put the box on the seat, and pulled his arms back. His opponent grinned and immediately drove off. He accelerated quickly and turned off at the next junction.

Jupiter nodded to Pete and Bob, who immediately made their way to Bob's Beetle. Would the kidnappers keep their word and release Barbara? Now that the tension of the handover had passed, the First Investigator felt a strong sense of unease. Perhaps they had just given away their only trump card for nothing in return.

Jupiter couldn't take it any longer, pulled out his mobile phone and called Barbara. It rang through without her answering. That was not a good sign.

The First Investigator turned round. Suddenly, he saw Barbara on the other side of the road, having obviously just come out of a side road. That was a relief!

Barbara ran across the road, shouting, "Thank you! Thank you!"

At that moment, the Beetle drove past them. Pete sat in the passenger seat, looked at Barbara and gave her a thumbs-up. That meant they had been able to take up the pursuit—as the transmitter was sending a signal.

7. Barbara Explains

Bob had to stop at a zebra crossing. A whole horde of children walked calmly across it.

“We have to keep going,” urged Pete, who was keeping a close eye on the receiver and pointing the way. “—Otherwise the kidnappers will soon be too far away and we’ll lose the signal!”

“What do you want me to do? Drive over the children?”

“Of course not! Just be ready. Well, the Buick will have to stop as well, maybe at a traffic light.”

Moments later, Bob was able to drive off again and Pete gave further directions. “Take the third turning on the right. Looks like the guys are still stationary. Perhaps they’ve reached their destination.”

Two minutes later, Pete blurted out, “Stop! Stop here. The signal is coming from nearby. We won’t drive right up to it in case they see us.”

Bob squeezed the Beetle into a tiny parking space.

“I can’t see the Buick anywhere,” said the Second Investigator, “but the transmitter is around here somewhere on the right, only fifty metres away—probably there...” He pointed to a building with many wide windows. The façade was painted bright red. There was a burger joint on the ground level.

“They are not celebrating their success with fast food, are they?” asked Bob.

Pete got out of the car. “All I know is that the signal is coming from right there... Oh, bummer!”

“What is it?” Bob got out of the car as well.

“They’re not here anymore,” said the Second Investigator. “We’re not going to find them.”

“Have we lost the signal? A moment ago it was—” Bob broke off as he realized the same thing as his friend.

Not far from the entrance to the burger shop, there was a cardboard box on the ground, very close to a rubbish bin. It was the document box!

The Second Investigator went over and picked it up. Of course it was empty—except for the transmitter, which was no longer hidden, but left inside the box.

Their opponents had obviously been suspicious enough to take a closer look at the documents and the packaging. They had taken what they wanted and left the box and the transmitter here.

“They’re one step ahead of us,” said Pete contritely. “At least, they did not attach the transmitter to another car to send us on a wild goose chase.”

“—Like what we do so often to others...” Bob commented, “but the driver made a mistake.”

“Huh?”

“If I saw it right earlier, he wasn’t wearing gloves in the car. That means he probably left fingerprints on the box.”

Shortly afterwards, they met in front of Barbara's motel. The young woman was still on duty at the reception desk, this time holding a phone handset to her ear and obviously listening to a caller.

When she saw the four of them enter, she put her hand over the mouthpiece and issued them a firm warning: "No parties, okay? And behave yourselves!"

Without waiting for a reply, she put the handset back to her ear. She didn't really seem to be interested in her guests and their potential party plans.

The temperature in Barbara's room had risen even further. She kicked off her shoes, dropped onto the bed, clasped her hands behind her head and stared at the ceiling. Pete sat on the chair at the window, whereas Bob and Jupiter sat on the floor.

"First things first..." Barbara said, "who has my pouch? I want it back."

Jupiter dug into this trouser pocket, took out the pouch, and handed it to Barbara.

"You know what?" she continued. "You guys should get one of these pouches. They are really useful. If not for this, we wouldn't be here now."

Pete rolled his eyes at that suggestion.

"What a day!" Barbara sighed. "I mean, I've been kidnapped for a few hours. The craziest things really do happen when you guys are around."

Pete gasped for air. "When we are around?" he repeated. "Just a reminder—you stole from your father and set all this in motion. Your father merely hired us and we—"

"Dad hired you?" Barbara asked. "Oh, that's why you were here so quickly. I was wondering why the whole time..." She faltered, closed her eyes and sighed. "Oh, you guys!"

"What's wrong?" asked Bob.

"That's probably why they found me. I'm sure they didn't follow me here yesterday. I was totally looking out for them, otherwise they would have broken in here in the evening... but you three... you led them straight here!"

"We did—what?" Pete exclaimed.

"Now hold on!" Bob added.

Jupiter got to the heart of the matter by demanding, "You should tell us everything now, Barbara... and why you think we're responsible for your kidnapping."

The girl sat up, leaned back against the wall and drew up her legs. She placed her feet on the mattress and wiggled her toes. "Sure. Now I can talk openly. There's no need to be secretive anymore."

"It doesn't look as hopeless as it might seem," Jupiter commented. "Our opponents may have the original documents, but I've photographed every page."

"Of course I hoped so," said Barbara.

"Of course," Bob repeated sceptically. Had she actually come up with that idea or was she just claiming it? "—But why did you do what you did? I hope you have a good explanation."

"I do," she assured them. "You know, there's one thing I have to tell you in advance. I think it's really great that we're working together again!"

"Out with it now, Barbara!" Bob urged.

"You probably know by now that my father is researching the Seven Cities of Gold. Those scoundrels have obviously realized that too. That's why they came to me."

"They came to you?" Pete asked, puzzled.

Barbara nodded. Her grey-green eyes were shining as she seemed to be enjoying the situation. "Well, they confronted me when I came home the day before yesterday. To be more precise, one of them ambushed me—Harry, the driver of the car."

"Harry?" Jupiter asked. "You know his name?"

Barbara waved her hand. "Not his real name, of course... but I said to myself straight away that he looks like a 'Harry'. That's why I call him that."

"Not exactly a proper investigation approach," said the First Investigator, piqued.

"—But it's practical," said Barbara. "Well, Harry approached me. He demanded that I get him the documents Dad was working on, otherwise he and his accomplice would get it themselves—and they might not be very squeamish about it..."

"So they forced you to carry out the theft?" asked Pete. "—And they threatened to hurt your father if you didn't?"

Barbara nodded, "—And of course they forbade me to go to the police and all that jazz. I've been racking my brains about what to do. Just tell Dad what's going on? I couldn't do that! He probably would have called the police and who knows what those scoundrels would have done to him? They seemed really ruthless. So I came up with another plan. It also occurred to me to get the three of you involved right from the start... but I was afraid that you would then advise me against my plan."

"—Which we would have done!" Pete huffed. "Er... well—I mean, if your plan was the idea of just running off with the stolen stuff."

"It was," Barbara confirmed, "at least the beginning of it."

"—But we could have developed a better plan together," said the Second Investigator.

"—But it wouldn't have been as good as mine," said Barbara.

Bob shook his head. "Why? Because yours worked so well?"

"It certainly would have... but anyway... instead of asking you in person, I sent you the e-mail this morning and I hoped you would do what I asked you to do."

"—To trust you..." Jupiter remembered.

Barbara smiled broadly across her face and nodded so hastily that her brown curls bounced. "Exactly! Yesterday, I took the documents—not to give them to those scoundrels—but to make off with them and then meet up with you, so that we could work out together how to proceed.

"My idea was quite simple—the documents would be out of the game for the time being, the scoundrels would look stupid, and we could go find the Cities of Gold! I knew Dad was going on his lecture tour and was therefore far away and safe. Anyway, I was convinced that you would decode my clue and find me here near the lighthouse... and that you would then support me, because you will, won't you?"

"What other choice do we have?" asked Jupiter. "You're presenting us with a *fait accompli*."

"Oh, don't pretend! You've already caught fire."

"I can't disagree with that wholeheartedly," said the First Investigator.

"Well... all in all, the whole thing went rather badly. If you ask me, this was what happened." Barbara crossed her arms and propped them up on her knees.

"I think I know what you're getting at," Jupiter said. "Why do you think we led our opponents straight to you? I admit, you could well be right..."

"—And could you be so kind as to explain it to us mere mortals?" Pete requested.

"After Barbara didn't bring them the documents, the scoundrels were watching the professor, perhaps with the idea that she would report to her father... but instead he came to us at the salvage yard... and that's how the scoundrels became aware of us. Yesterday, they saw us going with the professor to his office and then today, to the lighthouse... and to address what you brought up earlier, Pete, that's how they knew there were three of us.

"Also, Pete... do you remember—when we first walked towards the park, before that man went after Barbara, I told you that I had seen him near your car. Yes, they followed us

from Rocky Beach. We brought them straight to you, Barbara. That definitely makes us complicit in your kidnapping.”

“I forgive you,” Barbara said magnanimously. “You couldn’t have known.”

“—Because you didn’t tell us,” Bob argued.

“Accusations are really pointless now,” said the First Investigator. “When they kidnapped you, Barbara, you saw them. How many were there?”

“Two—Harry, the driver you saw, and the one who was chasing me... but I don’t know anything else. They made themselves pretty unrecognizable with caps and sunglasses. The only one who spoke was Harry, who also spoke to you on the phone.”

The Three Investigators asked a few more questions about the kidnapping, but Barbara was unable to provide any helpful information—neither about her kidnappers nor about the location of her brief captivity.

They were getting nowhere this way so Jupiter asked again about the beginning of the whole thing—when the scoundrels had demanded that Barbara provide the documents.

“They wanted the documents from me that they wouldn’t otherwise have got hold of. Breaking into my dad’s office would have been much more difficult for Harry and his accomplice. I assume they want to find the Cities of Gold... and so do I! Dad told me that the documents mention a map to those cities.” Barbara jumped up from the bed and threw her hands up in the air. “That would be something—to stand in cities of pure gold!”

“Many have searched for the cities without success,” Bob pointed out, “and your father was quite sceptical as to whether they even existed—”

“Hogwash!” interrupted Barbara. “You’re The Three Investigators and you’ve already found the craziest things; you’ve solved the craziest mysteries; and do you know why you’ll succeed this time as well?”

Pete grinned. “—Because we’re good?”

Barbara shook her head hastily. “No, because I’m on your side! ... There’s just one problem. Harry and his accomplice have the originals; we have the photos. That means that both sides can get on the trail to the map... so we have to be quicker than them!”

8. Clues From the Documents

The four of them eventually decided that there was nothing much they could do at the motel and so it was best to go back to Rocky Beach.

Barbara contritely agreed that it was necessary to contact her father, who should be in Vancouver by now.

"I'd best do that from home... but what do I tell him?" she mused. "I want to think about how to explain it to him first, and maybe you can help me somehow by... er..."

"Well, you're speechless for once," said Pete. "Are you scared?"

"That's not the right word," Barbara countered. "I could just do with some support."

"I understand that," Jupiter assured her, "but we mustn't waste time unnecessarily either. As you rightly said, our opponents have the same leads as we do."

"They could be faster as they have the originals," added Bob. "That's why we should look at the photographs as quickly as possible, and read through all the texts. I'll print them out."

"Good," said Pete. "Then I'll go with Barbara and help her with the phone call to her father. I'll meet you back at the salvage yard afterwards."

"Let's go!" Barbara said, beaming.

Moments later, Pete drove off in his MG, following Barbara, who was in her father's Chevrolet Impala. Bob gave Jupiter a lift in his Beetle.

At Headquarters, Bob immediately started printing out the numerous digital photos. The printer spat out page after page. There was a lot of text to read.

Meanwhile, Jupiter checked for fingerprints on the cardboard box that the kidnappers had thrown away. He found what he was looking for and was able to secure some almost perfect prints with fingerprint powder. He called Inspector Cotta of the Rocky Beach Police Department.

"Jupiter Jones..." the inspector said somewhat grumpily. "If you call me, it will be about another one of your cases, and not an invitation to a barbecue."

"That's right, sir," said the First Investigator. "We've secured some fingerprints—as part of an investigation. Could you help us check if the fingerprints belong to someone on the police database?"

A deep breath could be heard through the phone. "Since you probably won't give me a break anyway and because I trust that you took those fingerprints for a good reason, I agree. Bring them to me now. With any luck, I'll be able to give you an answer in a day or two... but no guarantee."

The First Investigator thanked him and made his way to the police department.

Meanwhile, Bob skimmed through the translated documents, hoping to come across revealing keywords, such as a mention of places or a map of some kind. He was still busy doing this when Jupiter returned, and together they rifled through letters, journals and the odd academic treatise.

"Here!" Bob called out after what felt like an eternity. "This article by a historian at the University of London quotes Cabeza de Vaca. Listen to this:

... There are alleged eyewitness accounts from men who claim to have known Cabeza de Vaca personally. Some were quoted from sources whose authenticity is questionable. It is true that rumours of a map to the Seven Cities of Cibola have been around for a long time... but does that make them any more credible?

As a historian who is committed to the facts, I have to say 'no', because the origins are all too firmly anchored in myth and hearsay. However, as someone who would like to believe in an extraordinary place like the Cities of Gold, I cannot deny a certain fascination with these ancient sources. One of these contemporaries passed down a statement that Cabeza de Vaca is said to have made on his deathbed.

"The map is my gift to the generations to come," he is claimed to have said. "—And if there should ever be as much despair in my beloved country as I felt during my brutal time in the New World, may this infinite wealth bring relief to the people. To this end, I entrust the map to my descendants. They will know when to reveal it."

Bob looked at his friend. "Sounds fantastic, doesn't it?"

"Fascinating," agreed the First Investigator. "I also have something here... It's a late 19th-century letter written by a descendant of Cabeza de Vaca. He signed it as 'Leandro Cabeza de Vaca' and the letter, dated 3rd August 1881, was addressed to his sister."

"—And what does it say?"

"This Leandro doesn't mention a map of any kind, just a 'set of directions'. Of course, that could mean anything... So, I quote:

... It is good that we have brought the set of directions to a place beyond the concerns of this world. May Our Lady Queen of Angels watch over it...

"... And here, a little further down, Bob, as he says goodbye:

... I wish you peace, Rosalia, and the same to the old thing we finally got rid of. It has caused our family too much trouble for too long.

"What do you think of this?" Jupe asked.

Bob took a look at the letter. "Hmm..." he mused. "The 'set of directions' could well refer to the route map to Cibola that the professor was talking about."

"—Or a 'set of directions' to get the route map to Cibola..." Jupe added. "This Leandro has brought it somewhere for safe-keeping, I suppose."

Bob added, "This mention of 'a place beyond the concerns of this world'... and 'Our Lady Queen of Angels' immediately struck me as a reference to a church."

"That's what I thought as well," Jupe agreed. "Then there is this 'old thing'. What could this be? Something that was handed down to them? And what is meant by 'finally got rid of'? Destroyed or hidden somewhere?"

"In any case, Cabeza de Vaca's descendants had something," Bob said. "If you ask me, Professor Mathewson really was on the trail of a sensation."

Just then, Jupiter's mobile phone rang. "Yes, Pete?"

"Uh... we're done here at Barbara's place," Pete said, "and I'm coming back... with her."

"Oh!" Jupiter replied. "Meet us at the outdoor workshop then."

The First Investigator was quick to suggest meeting at the outdoor workshop because The Three Investigators had an unwritten rule prohibiting outsiders from entering Headquarters—except for very specific reasons. This was to maintain their office as a secret hideout. More

so, if Barbara were allowed in, there was no telling that their secret would spread to the whole of Southern California.

“Bummer!” Jupe remarked after ending the conversation. “Barbara is coming with Pete.”

“Anyway, you go out first as I have to do some more research,” Bob said. “Leave this letter with me to check on the church.”

The First Investigator took the rest of the printouts and went out of the trailer. Meanwhile, Bob turned to the computer and opened a search engine.

At the outdoor workshop, Jupiter organized some chairs and cleared some space on the workshop table.

A while later, Pete appeared with Barbara in tow. She looked around. “Where’s Robert?”

“He’ll be coming later as he needed to do some more research,” Jupiter replied.

“Quite in his element,” Barbara remarked.

“How did your father take your explanation?” Jupiter asked.

“Not very enthusiastically... or to put it another way, he was furious.”

“Do you think so? I thought he was surprisingly calm,” Pete interjected. Turning to Jupe, he added, “I was allowed to listen in over the loudspeaker.”

Barbara shook her head. “By his standards, he was freaked out. It manifests itself differently for everyone. Anyway, he wasn’t just angry with me; he was also shocked. He didn’t necessarily like what I’d done, but he could understand it after my explanation. At first, he wanted to ground me for the next fifty years, but then I managed to convince him that I had to help you recover the documents and that I would be safe with you three.”

“Then we can continue,” Jupiter said. “Here are the printouts of some of the documents. I have to admit that I’m becoming more and more fascinated by all these accounts of the legendary Cities of Gold, a map, puzzles, coded messages... and then, there is a letter...”

“What letter?” asked Pete.

Jupiter gave a brief explanation.

“Puzzling messages,” Barbara said happily. “Great! Just like in my e-mail to you!”

Pete was far less enthusiastic. “I’d love it if people would just speak plainly for once.”

“—But then the map would have been found decades or centuries ago,” said Barbara.

“You’re right,” the Second Investigator admitted.

Wordlessly, the three of them took turns to look at the printouts.

Fifteen minutes later, Bob joined them.

“What did you find out, Bob?” Jupe asked.

“Two things. Firstly, the letter says that the ‘set of directions’—we’ll just call it the route map for now—has been brought to ‘a place beyond the concerns of this world’... and secondly, ‘may Our Lady Queen of Angels watch over it’. The two phrases immediately struck me as a reference to a church... but the question is which church? We must not forget that these descendants lived in Los Angeles. If you put the clues together, you end up with the oldest continuously used church in LA.”

“—So which church is it then?” Barbara asked.

“The oldest church in LA was built by the Spanish,” Bob explained. “Fitting, isn’t it? It’s called *La Iglesia de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles*—which translates as ‘The Church of Our Lady Queen of Angels’.”

“It makes perfect sense...” said Jupiter, “and just to be sure—did the church exist in 1881?”

“The church was founded in 1814, and the building was subsequently damaged, leading to a replacement chapel being built in 1861 using materials from the original structure. That’s twenty years before 1881.”

“So where is this church?” Pete asked.

“Los Angeles Plaza,” Bob replied, “within the historic district of Downtown LA.”

“Then there’s only one thing to do,” said Pete. “Let’s go there!”

“We certainly won’t be able to get in at this time of night,” said Jupiter, “but we’ll have a look around there tomorrow morning.”

“Maybe there’s a hiding place,” Bob continued, “an old treasure chamber, a crypt... I don’t know. Anyway, I can think of places where a map could remain undiscovered for a very long time. You should look around very carefully.”

“You?” asked Barbara. “Aren’t you coming with us?”

“I’m going to do some more research,” Bob explained. “I want to visit the university archives where your father borrowed the documents. Hopefully I can find out more about them there. I want to know where the documents came from and how the university acquired them. It would be fantastic if I could find a lead to other documents that way.”

“You want to go to my dad’s university and barge into the archives just like that?” Barbara questioned. “What makes you think that they will even entertain you?”

“Hmm... you’re right,” Bob admitted. “Come to think of it, our usual excuse of doing research for a school project might not be very convincing...”

“That’s where I come in,” Barbara announced. “I’ll just call my dad tonight and tell him to call the archives to let you in.”

9. The Oldest Church

Jupiter, Pete and Barbara set off the next morning. However, the journey to Los Angeles took much longer than usual this time. They got stuck in a traffic jam, and when the queue of cars broke up, they could only drive at walking pace.

Eventually, they reached their destination just before lunch time. The Church of Our Lady Queen of the Angels looked more like a noble, large residential building and would have easily passed for a villa if it hadn't been for the crosses on the roof. They couldn't estimate its age as the façade was in perfect condition and glowed in the sun.

Through the entrance gate, they first entered a large inner courtyard with several palm trees towering all around. To the right was the main church building. A wood-panelled wall with the altar stood in front of a few rows of pews.

Jupiter took an information leaflet. "It says here that parts of the church were built from the material of a previous church—as what Bob told us. In the vaulted area below us, there is a kind of museum where some of the artefacts and remains of the predecessor church are on display. I quote: '... treasures that have come down to us from ancient times.' I think we should take a closer look there. If there is anything relevant to us here, it's most likely to be there."

The entrance to the underground areas was in the inner courtyard, which was lined by a walkway with small round arches. As the two investigators and Barbara walked down the stairs, they realized that the term 'vault' from the brochure was rather overstated. The much more sober term 'cellar' better described the plain room.

The exhibition displayed old memorial plaques and the remains of a wall from the previous church, as well as a dilapidated wooden cross. In small glass cabinets lay open old books, such as a Bible from the 18th century. Elsewhere, a single, elaborately hand-painted parchment page was on display.

"Too bad," Barbara said as she began to read it. "Nothing here seems to be associated with the Cities of Gold."

"Honestly, I'd be surprised if there were something in such an obvious place," said Pete. "If anything, it would have to be much more hidden—in a secret hiding place under a floor slab, for example."

"—Or here?" Barbara climbed over a thick rope hanging loosely from two metal poles that blocked the way to a door labelled 'No Entry'. "Maybe there's a secret collection behind here—an old library or something."

"You can't just—" Pete began.

"Oh, yes, I can," Barbara said casually. She put her hand on the old, curved door handle and pushed it down. Then she shook it. It rattled, but the door didn't move. "It's locked... and how do we get in?"

"Not like this, anyway!" Pete realized. "Move away from there before someone chases us out."

"Oh, sometimes the direct route is the best."

At that moment, the sound of a key being turned in the lock was heard and then the door swung open inwards. A woman in a colourful dress had opened it. She had long blonde hair

and wore thick glasses.

“Dear friends,” she said, “this rope is to keep visitors away from this door, and so is this sign.” She pointed to the ‘No Entry’ sign.

“Excuse me,” said the Second Investigator. “We didn’t mean to disturb you.”

Barbara took a step to the side so that she could look past the woman into the room behind. “We just find it so fascinating here and wondered what other treasures might be hidden behind this door. It is so...”—she looked at the stranger with wide-open eyes—“... exciting!”

The woman laughed. “I’ve been a member of the Friends of the Church for many years and I volunteer in the historical exhibition. Our study room is at the back here... but believe me, if you’re thinking of gold or precious stones, I’ve never found anything like that in this church.”

“Our friend is talking about historical treasures,” said Jupiter, “clues to the past of this place or the people who attended this church in previous generations.”

“I can’t help you there either... but it’s a pleasure to meet such interested young people. You were lucky that I’m here right now. Feel free to come in if you want to have a look around... but don’t expect too much.” She stepped back and beckoned the three of them to follow her. “I’m Linda, by the way.”

The three of them also gave their names. Just before entering, Barbara looked at Pete and grinned. “There you go!” she whispered. “Works like a charm.”

“Linda could just as easily have thrown us out,” Pete whispered back.

“—But she didn’t.”

The study turned out to be a small library. The side walls were full of shelves containing nothing but books. There were also two small wooden tables in the room with a few plain and not particularly comfortable chairs.

“You won’t find any luxury in here,” said Linda.

“—Or daylight,” muttered Pete.

The woman obviously had very good ears and a fine sense of humour. “That’s just the way it is in a cellar, as far as I know in churches as well as in any other building. You know, we deliberately chose this environment. The fewer distractions there are, the better you can concentrate on your reading.”

Jupiter stood in front of one of the shelves and let his eyes wander over it. “Interesting books,” he said, “but am I right in thinking that these are mainly fairly new titles?”

“As far as I know,” Linda replied, “none of them are more than a few decades old. This is not a historical library. We only created it a few years ago. It’s very different from some monasteries or convents, where you can find magnificent editions that are centuries old or even manuscripts from before the printing press.” The last words were spoken with a gushing tone. “I love such old works, but I can’t help you with that here. Apart from the things outside in the exhibition—that’s all the treasures we have to offer.”

“Oh,” Barbara said, “so there are no old letters or maps that have been given to the church?”

“No, there are indeed no such things here.” Linda smiled broadly. “So you see, sometimes there are just ordinary things kept behind closed doors—no secrets like in colourful adventure movies.” She sat down on one of the chairs. The backrest creaked.

“Nevertheless, thank you for giving us a glimpse behind the scenes,” said Jupiter.

“You’re very welcome. Sometimes a little change is good. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“Have you ever heard of the Seven Cities of Gold?” Barbara blurted out.

Linda laughed. "The Seven Cities of Gold? I'm going to have to disappoint you. What makes you think of that?"

"It's about a presentation we have to give at school," Barbara claimed, "but it would have been too much of a coincidence if you had known anything about it."

The three of them said their goodbyes, left the study room and returned to the church courtyard.

It was now just after three o'clock in the afternoon and the heat was steadily increasing, which was particularly noticeable after their time in the cool cellar. They sat down in the shade of a round arch to discuss what to do next.

A man came into the courtyard and approached a monk who was just coming out of the church.

"I wonder—" Pete began.

"Quiet," Jupiter hissed between them.

"What—"

"Shh... don't move! If we're lucky, he won't have noticed us yet."

"Who?" whispered the Second Investigator.

"The man up ahead—I recognize his voice!"

Barbara slowly turned her head to look in the same direction as the First Investigator. She now also overheard the man, who was thanking the monk for some information.

"That's Harry!" she whispered.

Bob opened a creaking door and was surprised to see a room flooded with light. In front of a large window, a man of about forty was sitting at a laptop and busy typing.

The man looked up at Bob. "Yes?"

"Uh... good morning," Bob said. "Am I in the right place in the archives of the Historical Institute?"

"You are, yes." The man leaned back in his leather chair. The nameplate on the desk said 'Ben Salvador, PhD'.

"I'm here to do some research for Professor Mathewson."

"Oh, yes, you must be Bob."

"Yes, Bob Andrews..."

"Yeah, sure," Dr Salvador said. "Nicolas called me this morning telling me to expect you. I'm Ben Salvador... just call me Ben. Anyway, students are often surprised when they come in here for the first time because they were expecting some dusty, musty storeroom... and to be honest, that's how it used to be. Since I've been in charge here, the wind has changed."

"I'm not a student here," Bob admitted.

"It's not often that people who aren't part of the university find their way here. Anyway, come here, sit down." The archivist held out his hand.

After shaking hands, Bob sat down on a chair on the visitor's side of the desk.

"All right, how can I help you and the professor?" Dr Salvador asked.

"Professor Mathewson asked me if I could do some research for him."

"—And you let yourself be persuaded?"

"He didn't need much persuading as I love what he's researching at the moment. When I finish high school, I might go to university. It certainly can't hurt to get a taste of it now."

"Okay, so what's the research about?"

“It’s about the Seven Cities of Gold.”

“I know many people here, but not all the research areas... but the Seven Cities of Gold sounds great—kind of like something Indiana Jones would go for.”

Bob grinned. “That’s right. That’s why I wanted to find out more for the professor as he’s too busy with other work at the moment. He told me that he borrowed from you some documents on this matter.”

“Yes, yes... that’s correct.”

“Some of them are unique originals—letters, for example. It would help him with his research if he could trace the source of these documents. Specifically, how did they come into the possession of the archives?”

“Let me have a look.” Dr Salvador clicked his mouse and typed on the keyboard. “Here are the things Professor Mathewson borrowed. Yes, mostly original documents, that’s right. I can just see that they’re all from the same collection—K35. Very interesting.”

Bob waited for further explanations. When none came, he asked, “—And what does that mean?”

“Collection K only contains media that have been made available to us from private individuals or disbanded research centres, for example.”

“So everything in K35 comes from the same source? That would be good.”

“Well, it’s not quite that simple,” Ben Salvador explained, “but at least there is a good chance that I can fulfil your wish.”

“Thank you for your help,” said Bob.

The archivist waved him off. “I’ve got some time, so come on, come with me.”

“Where to?”

“To the archives. We’ll take a closer look at K35.”

He then led Bob to the other end of the room and unlocked a door. Behind it was what Bob imagined an archive looked like. It smelled a little musty and seemingly endless rows of shelves were overflowing with books—new and old, large and small, thick and thin; tattered paperback editions and splendid old leather volumes; series of magazines and stacks of old microfilm boxes.

Ben Salvador led Bob purposefully to an area that lay in darkness until the archivist switched on the light. A fluorescent tube on the ceiling flickered on with a pinging sound. Bob glanced at the rows of shelves as he walked past—K2, K3, K4, then after turning round, K23, K24 and onwards to K35.

“So, here we are.”

Bob noticed a gap of about twenty centimetres between the books. That was about the width of the box they had handed over to the kidnappers. He pointed to it. “Is this where the documents that the professor borrowed were placed?”

“You’re right,” replied Dr Salvador.

“So he took a whole block of related documents with him,” Bob concluded.

“It certainly looks that way... hang on.” The archivist took an index card sandwiched between two books. “These are notes we archive staff leave for each other. Not particularly sophisticated, but it works. Mostly it’s about work that still needs to be done. So, here it is—the origin of the items in K35 still has to be recorded in the computer for each individual medium. We got these from the liquidation of an old monastery library.”

“Hmm... a monastery...” Bob mumbled.

“In case you’re wondering—there’s often more than just pious literature there. Monasteries have been centres of research and knowledge for centuries, and they were often excellently equipped. Humanity owes them many ground-breaking discoveries in various

disciplines. In this case, the library was closed... hmm... about two years ago. So the things haven't been stored here in the archives for long."

"—But the monastery still exists?" asked Bob.

"I don't know that... but the name is written here, so it's easy to find out. It's the 'Monastery of St Mary, Queen of Angels'."

That left Bob speechless. "Bingo!" he thought to himself.

10. A New Lead

“What do we do now?” whispered Barbara.

“We stay calm and think,” Jupiter urged. “Take note that we only recognize his voice, but he’ll recognize any one of us. In addition, we have to find out if he’s alone.”

“I can only see Harry.”

“Stop calling him that until we know his real name!” Jupiter said angrily. “It’s confusing me.”

“Suit yourself,” Barbara countered. “You can call him the ‘first scoundrel’, the ‘car driver’, the ‘one with the raspy voice’ or whatever you choose, but I’m sticking with ‘Harry’... Anyway, while you were so petulant, Harry just went into the church... and nobody’s with him.”

“An accomplice could be waiting outside... or in the car... or already inside,” Pete mused. “I’ll have a careful look round the courtyard. You two stay here and keep yourselves hidden, okay?”

“Make sure he doesn’t see you,” the First Investigator warned.

Pete nodded and stood up. He pulled down the visor of his cap to partially hide his face. Then he looked around as unobtrusively as possible and walked along the round arches, always keeping to the edge of the inner courtyard.

The Second Investigator approached the church entrance at a strolling pace. There were only a few visitors, probably tourists. No one stood out or looked familiar to Pete. Nobody reacted to him either.

Everything remained quiet. He went back to his friends. “Nothing conspicuous,” he reported.

Jupiter pinched his lower lip. “Our opponent is in the church right now. This is a unique opportunity. We’ll turn the tables and confront him.”

“—Or we watch him,” Barbara suggested. “He’s probably here for the same reason we are—because he followed the trail using the documents. Maybe he’ll make a find. It could be that he’s smarter than us... or has found another clue.”

“Possibly,” Jupiter said, “but I’m not sure if he’s actually here for the same reason we are.”

“Well, hardly by chance,” said Pete.

“Of course... but somehow I think this church is a false lead—a mistake that we will exploit in our favour by confronting this Harry...” the First Investigator emphasized the name very clearly and nodded at Barbara.

“I think it’s great that my name for the scoundrel has caught on!” Barbara remarked.

“—Until we know his real name,” Juve clarified. “It’s too mouthful to call him ‘the one with the raspy voice’. Anyway, we’ll confront him now—in the church.”

However, it didn’t come to that. While the three friends were approaching the church door, it opened and Harry came out. He spotted them and ran out to the road.

“I’ll get him!” Pete rushed off, followed by Jupiter and Barbara.

However, the Second Investigator was faster than both of them... and also a little faster than the scoundrel. Pete was catching up when Harry suddenly ran across the road, and Pete

followed. A car braked with a screech and blared its horn. For a moment, the Second Investigator saw an angry face behind the windscreen, and in that fleeting moment, his attention on Harry wavered.

People were coming towards them on the pavement. Harry bumped into a brown-haired woman who cried out indignantly. She dropped a shopping bag and the next moment, tomatoes, grains of rice, and broken eggs scattered on the pavement in front of Pete. He spontaneously ran around them and almost crashed into a street lamp. Harry looked back over his shoulder, his face contorted in anger. The next moment, he disappeared down a small side street.

Pete had lost a few seconds. Barbara overtook him. She left a small red blob of tomato sludge behind her every step. She had obviously run right through the groceries on the pavement so as not to lose time going around the mess like Pete did.

An engine roared. A breath later, a car sped off. It was the silver Buick! It sped towards Pete and Barbara. Harry was behind the wheel, blaring his horn wildly. Pete saw him driving towards them, and he instinctively pushed Barbara out of the way. Harry jerked the steering wheel round at the same time, swerving out of the way. Then he sped off. His number plate was still not visible.

Barbara had fallen down. Pete helped her to stand up.

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah...” she confirmed, wiping dirt off her knee. “This chase was probably for nothing... I mean it didn’t help us at all.”

“Yes, it did,” Pete disagreed, “because I saw something as he drove towards us—something that I myself stared at for a long time yesterday.”

“What is it?” These words came from Jupiter, who had also approached in the meantime.

“There was a small device on his dashboard... and I’ll call myself ‘Harry’ if that wasn’t a receiver for a transmitter—the same kind of thing we use. How could we have been so stupid as not to think of it earlier? There’s probably a transmitter attached to my MG somewhere. He used it to track us to Barbara yesterday... and here to the church today!”

Jupiter nodded. “That fits. To add on to what I said earlier, he didn’t come here because he discovered a reference to the church in the documents. He simply followed us because he was hoping that we would lead him to the map. So it was probably a good thing that we took this wrong turn. Firstly, we didn’t lead him to the correct destination; secondly, we now know that he is following us and how... and thirdly...”—Jupiter sounded extremely satisfied—“he doesn’t know that we know he’s following us—which we can exploit.”

“Wait a minute, what can we exploit?” Barbara asked.

“He’s put a transmitter somewhere, probably on Pete’s MG... and he thinks we don’t know that, so we can use it to mislead him—lure him somewhere. If we find the right trail to the map, we’ll send our opponents in the opposite direction.”

“—And how will you find the right trail?”

Jupiter raised his shoulders. “No idea,” he admitted, and then added a quick “—not yet!”

Bob tried to digest the news. The documents came from the Monastery of St Mary, Queen of Angels... and ‘St Mary’—as Bob knew—was often referred to as ‘Our Lady’. So the clues from the letter fitted just as well with this monastery, as with the oldest church in Los Angeles, where his friends were currently at.

If any place was even further ‘beyond the concerns of this world’ than a church, it was a monastery... and just as the archivist had explained, there were often repositories of

knowledge. It was the perfect place to hide a document like the route map to Cibola, keeping it safe and preserving it for generations.

“Are there any other media here that come from the monastery library?” asked Bob.

“Indeed,” said Dr Salvador, “but I’m sorry to say I can’t lend them to you. Professor Mathewson will have to come here himself.”

“Sure... but while I’m here, could I have a look at them?”

The archivist looked at his watch. “You can do that... but I have to get back to my seat. You handle everything with care, understand? What you take from the shelves, you’ll put right back there; I’m counting on that.” He laughed.

“Don’t worry... I’ll take good care,” Bob promised. “I understand records and archives and I know how important it is to keep things organized.”

“The things from the monastery library are all on this shelf. Here, this row, and the four below, all the way to the back of the room. The bottommost shelf here is half full—and that’s all to it. All in all, that’s a lot of stuff. Well, have fun checking them out!” With that, Ben Salvador left.

Bob was excited about the developments. If the map had come to the monastery back then... was it now stored here in the archives? If that was the case, someone had probably given it a catalogue number without realizing what it was.

Bob excitedly began to search through the stock. There were many thick leather books—collections of sermons, Bible texts, prayer texts, periodicals... but none of that interested Bob at the moment. He was hoping for more letters from Cabeza de Vaca’s descendants or... the map itself.

However, he was bitterly disappointed in this respect. He found nothing more of interest. Professor Mathewson’s research in the collections had obviously been thorough and good. He had already borrowed everything that was or could be connected to the Cities of Gold.

Nevertheless, the lead to the monastery that he had learned could be worth its weight in gold. This thought made Bob grin.

When Bob left the archive room, Ben Salvador was at his desk. “So, is your head smoking already? This is what student life is like when you want to take a history subject.”

“I found it very interesting,” said Bob. “It’s my kind of thing.”

“I’ve looked it up on the Internet for you in the meantime. The monastery still exists. It’s very close to Los Angeles, in the Mount San Antonio area.”

Bob could place that. The mountain was located east of Rocky Beach, situated across the expansive Los Angeles Basin. On a clear day, the two sometimes snow-covered peaks of Mount San Antonio could be seen from the coastline.

“However, the monastery is on the verge of having to close,” Dr Salvador continued. “They needed a repository for all their books and documents, and that’s why the monks have sold their library to us.”

“The entire collection?” Bob asked. The idea that the route map could still be in the monastery was tantalizing.

“According to our records, yes. The library was closed down... but it’s possible, of course, that some items are still in the monastery. You can only find that out on site.”

“You’ve helped me a lot. I have one last question, Dr Salvador.”

“Go ahead.”

“You said that the monastery library was closed two years ago. How does something like that work? You obviously had no contact with the monks there yourself... but perhaps one of your colleagues did?”

Bob figured that he could find out more from this person about how the handover had been carried out—whether books and documents had been left behind in the monastery; whether everything had been transferred to the university archives or perhaps given to other research centres or private collectors. Many things were still conceivable in this respect and Bob wanted to try to follow up all the traces.

“Quite possibly,” replied the archivist, “even probably. I can find out for you. Leave me your mobile phone number and I’ll ask.”

Bob thanked him and went back to his Beetle. On the way, he typed a message to Jupiter and Pete: ‘Forget the church. We’ve got a new lead!’

In the early evening, The Three Investigators and Barbara were sitting at the coffee table on the verandah of the salvage yard office. The yard was closed for the day as Uncle Titus and Aunt Mathilda were away visiting friends.

“Well, one thing is certain,” Jupiter summarized after they had brought each other up to date. “We have to get to that monastery—and this time our opponents mustn’t follow us there.”

Thanks to the wrong track to the church, they knew that their cars were fitted with transmitters, so the little detour had by no means been useless. In the meantime, they had checked and found these small devices on both Pete’s MG and Bob’s Beetle, each cleverly and securely attached behind the bumper. “We couldn’t have done it better ourselves,” Pete had commented on the find.

The Three Investigators had not removed the transmitters because they wanted to carry out the First Investigator’s idea and use them to guide their opponents in the wrong direction. The only thing they still had to discuss was how exactly this would work.

“It’s too late to set off today,” Jupiter continued, “but tomorrow morning we should make our way to the monastery. I know that my uncle will be busy in Santa Ana looking for items for the salvage yard. He wants to set off in his pick-up truck at around ten o’clock. We can take advantage of that. Santa Ana is not on the way to Mount San Antonio. We’ll attach the transmitter from Pete’s MG to the pick-up. Then our opponents will follow my uncle instead of us.”

“Good idea, but risky,” said Pete. “Harry and his accomplice could be watching the salvage yard, and they could see that my MG isn’t going off.”

“Good point,” admitted the First Investigator. “So we’ll improvise—we’ll drive after my uncle in the MG first, before dropping off at a suitable spot and let them follow the pick-up.”

The Three Investigators had some experience in fending off pursuers—after all, they had often followed others themselves. The main thing they discussed was about getting to the monastery. Other than that, it couldn’t be planned as they didn’t know what they would find there.

Just then, Bob’s mobile phone rang. He fished it out of his trouser pocket. “Yes?”

“This is Ben Salvador.”

“Oh, Dr Salvador. Nice of you to call. Have you found out anything?”

“I was able to track down the colleague who was in contact with the monastery at the time. His name is Stewart Patrick. If you have any questions about the whole process, he can tell you all about it. He told me that he’s been in contact with the monks for a long time. It’s thanks to him that the collection was handed to us of all people. Anyway, he’s here tomorrow and said you could come round... but only in the morning as we close at lunchtime on Saturdays.”

“I’d love to come,” Bob assured him. “Thanks for getting in touch!” He said goodbye and hung up. “I guess that means that we’ll be going separate ways again,” he said to his friends. “You go to the monastery without me. That has another advantage, by the way. Splitting up will make it tougher for our opponents to keep tabs on us. They’ll have to decide whether to follow the pick-up, me, or maybe even both. Right now, we only know about Harry and Oliver.”

“Oliver?” asked Barbara.

“Well, Harry’s accomplice.”

“Sounds fitting,” said Barbara. “I’ll go along with that.”

Jupiter rolled his eyes and groaned.

11. Going Separate Ways Again

The next morning at nine o'clock, Jupiter, Pete and Barbara arranged to meet up at the salvage yard, while Bob was to go straight from home to the university archives.

Pete reached the salvage yard ten minutes before nine and parked his car to block Uncle Titus's pick-up, ensuring it couldn't leave without Pete knowing. The threesome had to set off in the MG at the same time to deceive their opponents, but they couldn't let Uncle Titus in on their plans.

Pete had already removed the transmitter from his bumper the previous evening and stored it in the glove compartment. He took it from there and attached it to the pick-up inconspicuously.

Jupiter was sitting on the verandah with coffee steaming from a cup in front of him. Pete sat down next to him. "You look tired."

"I couldn't sleep. I had too much on my mind."

Before Pete could reply, Barbara cycled through the open gate into the salvage yard. Her brakes squealed miserably as she stopped close to the verandah and swung herself off the saddle. A bag dangled from the handlebars. "I've brought us doughnuts!" she announced.

"Perfect for waking me up," Jupiter said, appearing instantly rejuvenated. They made quick work of the treat.

Uncle Titus came to them at half past nine. "Pete, your lean mean racing machine is parked in front of my pick-up. I've got to get going."

"To Santa Ana?" Jupiter asked to make sure.

Titus confirmed. "I wasn't actually planning to leave for another half hour, but there's a lot of traffic so I'd better get going."

"We want to set off too," said Pete, as if it were a coincidence. "That fits perfectly."

Shortly afterwards, the MG and pick-up left the salvage yard. Barbara sat in the passenger seat of Pete's car, with Jupiter in the back.

The Second Investigator drove after Uncle Titus, keeping a little distance. They all kept an eye out for possible pursuers. At one point, Jupiter thought he recognized a Buick far behind them but he couldn't say for sure whether it was Harry's Buick.

Just before the city limits of Rocky Beach, Pete cut into a side street he knew well, ready to slip away through a shortcut. By the time his pursuer reached the junction, the MG would be out of sight—and their opponent would be following the pick-up without realizing it—at least that was the plan... Of course, Harry—or whoever was following them—would see through the trick sooner or later, but by then he would have long since lost track of the MG.

Pete drove through the residential area and finally left Rocky Beach in the direction of Los Angeles. To get to Mount San Antonio and thus to the monastery, they had to drive a long way round the metropolis. That would usually take some time, but today, they made pleasingly fast progress.

Mount San Antonio was the highest mountain in Los Angeles County. Both of its peaks had lingering patches of snow in shaded areas. According to the information on the Internet, the monastery was located on a wooded mountainside that was not very dense.

“Last year, I wanted to climb the two peaks of San Antonio,” said Pete. “It’s not that easy as you need good weather conditions.”

“—So you didn’t make it?” asked Barbara.

“I couldn’t leave at all. A case got in the way.”

“Well, that’s a great reason. I’m so excited to see what awaits us!” Barbara drummed her fingers on the dashboard. “Oh, boys, I’ve missed investigating with you so much.”

“—But next time,” Jupiter replied dryly, “you could just hire us instead of seemingly committing a crime. Agreed?”

“Agreed!” Barbara beamed at the idea that there would be a next time.

Pete turned onto a very narrow, bumpy gravel road. The MG was given a good shake. They overtook a hiker carrying a huge backpack. There were no other vehicles coming towards them for the next few minutes. Pete was worried about his tyres. Also, every now and then, he heard the ‘plong’ of a stone being thrown up and hitting the car body.

Finally, the monastery came into view—perched on the slope above the gravel road. It was an old colonial building made of stone blocks with a church-like tower, to which several buildings the size of detached houses had been added. It stood on a small plateau with just enough space for the monastery complex itself and a few scrawny trees.

The gravel road was a little wider at this point and a rusty metal sign indicated that visitors to the monastery should park at the side of the road. A battered-looking white van was parked there, perhaps belonging to the monastery. A track led upwards from there in steep hairpin bends.

“Let’s hope for friendly monks to welcome us,” said Jupiter.

“—And that we’ll find a great secret hiding place for a map!” Barbara beamed.

Ben Salvador was at the archive reception desk again. When he saw Bob, he called his colleague on his mobile phone.

“Stewart will be right over,” he said afterwards.

Moments later, a man with an impressive, shiny bald head, and friendly eyes came in. “Are you Bob?”

Bob confirmed. “Thank you for your time, Mr Patrick.”

“Come on, I could do with a break where I can sit down. We can talk there undisturbed.”

Stewart Patrick led Bob along a narrow corridor to a frosted glass door, which he opened with a chip card on a reader. In the deserted room beyond, he went to a tiny kitchenette and filled a kettle. “I’m going to make myself some tea. Do you want some? Or would you prefer a juice?”

“Yes, I’d prefer juice, thank you.”

Stewart opened a fridge and handed Bob a bottle. “Have a seat.”

Bob sat down on the worn leather couch.

“So you’re interested in the monastery? I didn’t quite understand what Ben was telling me.”

So Bob told his story about doing research for Professor Mathewson—which wasn’t one hundred per cent true. In principle, Barbara’s father was the client of their current case... only it had developed in a completely different direction than expected.

“Ah, yes,” Stewart said, while pouring himself a cup of tea. “Professor Mathewson is a good man—a kind of genius... and the Cities of Gold, it’s exciting stuff! If the professor was a bit more adventurous, like Indiana Jones, for example, I wouldn’t put it past him to find those cities.”

Bob imagined Barbara's father making his way through the jungle in the same way as the movie hero... and how Barbara would not be dissuaded from accompanying him under any circumstances.

"I've known the monastery for years," explained Stewart. "I wrote my dissertation as a student about this institution, which was founded in the 18th century. During my research, I was often there and got to know most of the monks, especially the abbot, Father Sebastian. I've stayed in touch ever since and that's how he came to offer the university their library's holdings when they had to close it down—not for free, of course, but at a good price. The monastery is short of money. It's on the verge of financial ruin and the sale of the library was a step towards ensuring that the monks could at least keep things going for a little while longer. That was two years ago. Now the closure is almost imminent—another six months at most."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Bob, "and all the books and documents from the library have really come here?"

Stewart blew into his cup and took a sip of tea. "Officially, yes."

This answer caught Bob's attention. "—And unofficially?"

Stewart laughed. "Probably too. I wrote my thesis back then on forbidden book collections in monastery libraries. I researched this using specific examples—including this monastery. I was never able to prove that there was a secret vault there... but somehow I still believe it."

"A secret vault?" Bob asked. "What do you mean?" He unscrewed his juice bottle and drank from it. Only now did he realize how thirsty he had been the whole time.

"Perhaps you've heard that there have always been books that were banned in past centuries—for all sorts of reasons. Especially in ecclesiastical circles, including monasteries, such books were banned on the one hand... but on the other hand, they were also kept and locked away from time to time—in a secret, forbidden part of the libraries that nobody knew about apart from a few insiders. That's a rather dark chapter in history, and there are quite a few legends about it. In movies, it is often exaggerated beyond belief... but there has been such secret vaults."

"—Which could be some sort of secret underground room, right?"

"Exactly! It's a room or an area that is only accessible to a few monks, perhaps only the head monk. As far as the rest of the world is concerned, it doesn't exist... or more accurately, the explosive books have been hidden from the world."

"They were brought to 'a place beyond the concerns of this world'," added Bob—that was what the old letter said.

"Yes, you could put it like that. You said it well."

Could the route map be in the monastery's secret vault? Bob had an idea. "Has anyone else enquired about the material from the monastery library recently?"

"Apart from Professor Mathewson and you, nobody... at least as far as I know. I haven't spoken to anyone about it yet. By the way, the monks at the monastery were pleased when they heard that someone was interested in their things."

"You told them about me?" Bob asked in surprise.

"Not you, but the professor. I told you that I'm in contact with the people there. When I found out that Professor Mathewson had borrowed the things for his research, I took it as an opportunity to go there again. I told the monks that there might have been a map hidden among their books and documents for centuries without anyone knowing. It was fun to let my imagination run wild about the Cities of Gold. It's also nice for those involved with the

library to know that the old book treasures aren't just sitting here in the archives, but that someone is working with them and that they're being used for research."

"I see..." Bob murmured.

Stewart finished his tea. "I should get back to work now. Have all your questions been answered?"

"Yes, thank you. You've helped me a lot." Thoughtfully, Bob left the archives and made his way to his Beetle. He kept a close eye on the surroundings. Nobody seemed to be watching or following him.

Bob quickly bent down, removed the transmitter and left it in the car park. He kept an eye out for pursuers, but didn't notice anything suspicious. He immediately drove off, but made a brief stop at a petrol station to quickly call Jupiter to tell him about his findings.

Bob then decided to go back to Headquarters to do research on secret vaults.

12. The Monastery

When Bob called Jupiter, the First Investigator had just got out of Pete's MG. Pete and Barbara had already set off up the path towards the monastery.

The girl waved to Jupiter. "Come on, get a move on!"

"I had to answer a phone call," Jupiter defended himself loudly.

"Walk as you talk!" Pete urged.

Instead of arguing about it, the First Investigator set off. The climb was steep and he quickly broke into a sweat in the heat of the sun. Just in time, his mobile phone rang again. He stopped in his tracks.

This time it was Inspector Cotta. "Jupiter, I've got some feedback for you on the fingerprints."

"Fantastic," said the First Investigator, breathing heavily.

"I'm not so sure about that, but you're not going to like it, I think, because the result is that there are no matches. In other words, the fingerprints couldn't be matched to those stored in the police database."

"That is indeed disappointing," Jupe admitted. "Thank you anyway, Inspector." At least that meant they weren't dealing with a criminal known to the police... and the fingerprints could still be used as evidence later if they had to report a specific suspect. So the operation had by no means been in vain. When investigating a case, there was seldom a direct route to the goal.

This time Pete and Barbara had waited for him. Jupiter told them about the conversations with Bob and Inspector Cotta.

"As it is, there is a possibility that the route map is in a secret vault at the monastery," he concluded. "However, Stewart Patrick never found it during his research."

"Then how are we supposed to find it?" asked Barbara.

"We have a big advantage," Pete said confidently. "As investigators, we've already found many hiding places. I believe we have much more experience in such matters than he does."

However, they had to be given the opportunity to search for the secret vault. The first step was to be allowed into the monastery.

They soon reached the old stone buildings. The footpath led directly to the entrance in the tower of the main building. At an oversized wooden door, there was no bell, but a heavy knocker in the form of a solid metal ring. Barbara lifted it with a squeak and rapped it.

It took two minutes before the door creaked open and swung inwards. A man in a brown monk's habit faced them. "Yes?" His voice sounded friendly. "What can I do for you, young travellers? Are you lost?"

"No, we came to you specifically," Jupiter explained. "May we come in and have a look around the monastery?"

"We rarely have visitors here," said the monk, "but please, feel free to come in. It is in our rules that our doors are always open to anyone who comes to us for protection and help..."

"Help, yes!" said Barbara excitedly. "We have a lot of questions."

“You can ask me that, but it would be good if you weren’t in too much of a hurry,” said the monk. “Please come in first. You have come through the sun. A little shade will do you good.”

The noticeably cooler air in the building was a welcome change. They entered a corridor whose floor and walls were made of old stones and were uneven.

“Follow me to the meeting room,” the monk asked. “There you can tell me more about what brings you to us.”

In contrast to the almost medieval-looking corridor, the meeting room was almost modern. There were some red upholstered chairs at a table.

The monk walked over to a small stereo system and pressed a button. Liturgical chant came out of the speakers and filled the room so quietly that it didn’t interfere with the conversation.

“So there’s electricity here in this remote area,” Barbara realized.

That made the monk laugh. “We may have withdrawn from modern everyday life to a certain extent, but we’re not living in the Stone Age. I, for example, really appreciate the convenience of hot shower water. The electricity comes from our generator... but I don’t think you’ve come to us for such things.”

“That’s correct,” said Jupiter. He decided to take advantage of the information Bob had given them. “We know Stewart Patrick from the archives at the University of Los Angeles. Does that name mean anything to you?”

To his disappointment, the monk replied in the negative.

“He was the middleman, so to speak, thanks to whom the books and documents from your library were sold to the university,” added the First Investigator.

“Then you should probably speak to our abbot, Father Sebastian, as he was responsible for the sale.”

“That would be very kind of you to give us this opportunity... er...”

“Yes?”

“How should we address you?” Jupiter asked.

“I’m Brother David. Wait here; I’ll speak to the abbot. He’ll either come to you, or if he can’t, I’ll return to you shortly.”

Minutes later, someone came to them. It wasn’t David, but the man was wearing an identical frock. He had a grey three-day beard. “I am Father Sebastian, the abbot,” he introduced himself, “and you are friends of Stewart Patrick, I understand.”

“Friends is a bit of an exaggeration,” Pete explained. “He told us about you and the monastery library.”

At the mention of the library, the abbot scowled. “A sad subject. You probably know that we had to close the library. Old treasures were stored there. Some of the books had been with us for generations. The predecessors of my predecessors had acquired them and it all ended with me. I, of all people, had to hand them away.” A deep sigh followed.

“—But at least they ended up in a good place,” said the First Investigator. “We’ve read some of the documents from the university’s archives and came across an interesting topic. That’s why we made our way here.”

“—And what topic would that be?”

Jupiter, Pete and Barbara exchanged quick glances.

“Cibola,” said the First Investigator.

“I’ve never heard of it,” said the abbot.

“The Seven Cities of Gold.”

“Aha... Stewart told me about that,” the abbot recalled, “but I didn’t know the relevant documents... and it’s more than doubtful whether there’s any truth to the whole thing.”

“We believe that the documents were given to the monastery by the descendants of the Spanish navigator and explorer Cabeza de Vaca about 150 years ago.”

“That’s news to me,” said Sebastian. “I have to say that I used the library, of course, and also managed the liquidation... but there are monks who were much more familiar with the collections, especially Brother Luke, who looked after the books and then also took care of the handover. The entire monastery is facing the same fate, and just like the library, it will soon cease to exist. We will have to move to another place. It breaks my heart.”

“Can we talk to Brother Luke?” asked Pete.

“He’s gone to the city to pick up some supplies. I don’t know when he will be back.”

The First Investigator turned to Pete and Barbara. “Maybe he knows something about the secret vault.” As he said this, he paid close attention to the abbot’s reaction. He had said it deliberately, possibly to throw Sebastian off his guard.

The abbot shook his head slightly. “A secret vault? I have to disappoint you. There is no such thing as a secret vault in this monastery and never has been. Did Stewart Patrick plant that idea in your head? How often did he ask and look for it? In vain, of course.” The monk smiled.

“Wouldn’t any monk say that in order to keep the secret of a secret vault?” said Barbara.

Jupiter drew in a sharp breath. Barbara’s question was very direct and quite blatant. It was now irreversible... but could prove to be quite useful.

The abbot remained reasonably calm. “It seems to me that the young lady and the young gentlemen have been reading too many monastery conspiracy thrillers. Let me assure you that there is no secret vault in these walls, no secret circle of monks who want to take over the world, or any such nonsense!”

“Sorry,” said Barbara. “I didn’t mean to offend you or the monastery.”

The abbot nodded. “Good, but I recommend that in future you consider your words more carefully before you let them pass your lips.”

“I’ll try,” Barbara assured him.

“Can we see the room where the library used to be?” asked Pete.

“I don’t see any reason why not,” said Sebastian, “but don’t get your hopes up. There’s nothing there now, but I’ll show you anyway...”

“If you don’t mind, could we wait for Brother Luke at the library?” Jupiter asked.
“We’ve come all the way here, so we don’t mind waiting to talk to him.”

“Sure. I’ll let him know when he comes back. Please be patient, as it may take a while.”

13. The Secret Vault

Father Sebastian led them back into the corridor and exited via a side door of the building.

“The library was housed in a small detached building behind here,” the abbot explained. “It’s more like a garden shed, if you like.”

They walked past scraggy trees that shared the small plateau with the old stone structures. The path led them behind the monastery complex, towards a rock face that ascended approximately five metres before transforming into a steep incline. Jupiter glanced upwards, his eyes tracing the line to the peaks of Mount San Antonio.

The former library building was situated at the base of the slope, its rear pressed against the rock. This rectangular structure, constructed of brick, featured a frontage of about five metres. Inside was a single room and at the centre stood a wooden table surrounded by several chairs. The walls were lined with wooden shelves, interrupted only by two windows on the right side of the building. All the shelves were empty and covered in a layer of dust.

“As I said, you won’t find much here anymore,” said the abbot. “For me, the sight is frustrating—a sign of our decline. Perhaps it will be good if we move to another monastery soon.” With that, Sebastian said goodbye and reiterated that he would send Luke as soon as possible.

Pete closed the door and dropped into one of the chairs. “This must be about the most boring place our cases have taken us so far.”

“If we sit here and do nothing, that’s true,” said Jupiter. “Come on, let’s go in search of a secret vault. If it exists at all, it’s not certain that the entrance is here in the library... but it should be the most plausible place in the whole monastery.”

“—And what if this Luke turns up?” asked Barbara.

“Then we’ll either find an excuse or be blunt about what we’re doing here,” said the First Investigator. “It’s not a crime.”

The three of them set off in search of a hidden door or other access to a secret vault. They began with the back wall where the little building was flush against the rock. Every gap between the bricks was meticulously inspected for an entrance to a hidden cave. Even the wooden shelves were removed, yet the effort yielded nothing. Down on the floor, they crawled looking for a trapdoor, eventually shoving the table aside to check for a secret basement. Still, nothing!

“I’m sure Stewart Patrick had the same idea during his search,” Pete sighed. “At least something’s going well.”

“What?” asked Jupiter sceptically.

The Second Investigator grinned. “This Luke hasn’t turned up and therefore hasn’t asked us any embarrassing questions yet.”

“Let’s hope he turns up soon,” said Barbara. “Maybe he can tell us something that will give us a clue.”

However, they did not remain inactive until then. They now also searched the side walls. Jupiter and Barbara went for the wall with the windows, Pete for the one opposite. After all, there might be a secret compartment in the stone walls—even if it were a very small secret

vault that could only hold a few books. They worked their way slowly, removing one shelf after another, and then put them back in place. In the process, they stirred up a lot of dust.

As Pete and Barbara continued their search, Jupiter stood thoughtfully, pinching his lower lip as he contemplated other possibilities. All of a sudden, he called out, "Pete, do you have a measuring tape?"

"Not on me," Pete replied. "There's one in the investigation kit, but it's in Bob's car."

"Okay, never mind," Jupiter said. "I'll use my foot length to take some measurements."

"What are you going to measure?"

"Just following a hunch," the First Investigator replied. "You keep searching... I'll call you if I discover anything."

He moved to the right wall, aligning his back and one heel against it. Then, he placed the heel of his other foot forward, touching the tip of the first foot, both feet pointing in the same direction, perpendicular to the wall. He proceeded to walk heel-to-toe towards the left wall, counting his steps to measure the room's width in terms of 'foot-lengths'—or more accurately, 'shoe-lengths'.

"Hmm..." Jupiter murmured to himself. "The internal width is $15\frac{1}{2}$ shoe-lengths." He then used the same method to estimate the room's depth, from the door to the back wall. "17 shoe-lengths..."

"What are you mumbling about?" Pete asked.

Without responding, the First Investigator dashed outside and measured the building's external width and depth using shoe-lengths.

Moments later, he hurried back inside. "Pete, Barbara, I think we are searching in the wrong place for a hidden entrance!"

"What do you mean?" Barbara asked.

"Have you noticed that this room appears squarish, while the exterior is more rectangular?" Juve explained. "Well, I took some rough measurements with my shoe-lengths... Let me clarify..."

"The building's external width is $16\frac{1}{2}$ shoe-lengths, while the room's width is $15\frac{1}{2}$ shoe-lengths—a difference of one shoe-length. That means the brick wall is half a shoe-length thick... but here's the kicker... the external depth of the building is 20 shoe-lengths, and the internal depth of the room is only 17 shoe-lengths. That's a difference of three shoe-lengths. Do you see what I'm getting at?"

"That could only mean that..." Pete replied, "I mean, could it be that the back of this building... has two walls... with a hidden cavity in between?"

"Precisely!" Juve confirmed, his voice brimming with excitement. "Based on my measurements, if there's a cavity, it must be about three shoe-lengths from the back of the building."

"Since we have checked the internal back wall and found nothing," Pete continued, "the entrance to this cavity could well be on the outside of the building."

"Exactly!" Juve said. "Let's go check it out!"

The trio sprang into action, rushing out of the building. From the outside, they noted four imposing columns anchoring each corner. The walls stretched between the columns, recessed about three centimetres inward. Jupiter and Barbara proceeded to the right side of the building, while Pete went to the left.

On the right side, the back column was flush with the rock face. Juve and Barbara meticulously examined the wall, searching for any sign of a gap or a hidden door. However, they found nothing. Moments later, they heard Pete call out: "Over here! I found something!"

They hurried over to join the Second Investigator. On this side, the back column was not flushed with the rock face, and there was a gap of about half a metre.

“As I understand it, a column is typically load-bearing,” Pete explained, “but in this case... I suspect this column can be moved. Look what I discovered down there...” He pointed to the ground between the column and the rock face.

“Tracks!” Jupiter exclaimed. “Two metal tracks that allow the column to be pushed aside!”

“Yes,” Pete confirmed. “I cleared the debris and found the tracks leading towards the rock face.”

Jupiter inspected the top of the column. “You’re right, Pete... This column can be moved. Look at that gap between the top and the roof beam. In this corner, the walls are bearing the weight of the roof, and the column is actually unconnected to the building!”

“All we need to do now is push the column towards the rock face and hope the wheels beneath it still function,” Pete declared.

“Let’s get on with it,” Jupe urged. “Barbara, could you head to the front of the building and alert us if anyone approaches?”

“On it, Captain!” Barbara dashed off.

The wall indentation of three centimetres provided just enough space to grip the column. They pushed with all their might, but the column remained stubbornly in place. It seemed stuck, likely due to a long period of inactivity or malfunctioning wheels.

Pete repositioned himself with his back to the rock face and pulled the column along the tracks. Together, they exerted all their strength to push and pull... until they finally heard a scraping sound from below. The column jolted away from the wall. Fuelled by determination, they redoubled their efforts, and the column gradually shifted, revealing a hand-width gap. Light from the outside streamed in, revealing a hidden passageway!

“Phew!” Pete exhaled sharply. “How could anyone manage to open this?”

“It would have been much easier if the wheels were in proper working condition.”

Barbara, alerted by the noise, returned just in time to see the column being moved further until the opening was wide enough to enter. Dust trickled down and a few bugs crawled out. A small spider scurried over Pete’s hand. The Second Investigator shook it off in disgust.

Now, they could see the second wall, exactly as Jupe had predicted. Between the two walls lay a passageway about 40 centimetres wide.

“Oh, my!” Barbara exclaimed, her voice filled with astonishment. “This has to be the entrance to the secret vault!”

Fascinated, the Second Investigator pulled out his mobile phone and activated the flashlight function to better illuminate the passageway. Thick cobwebs were everywhere—a clear indication that no one had ventured in here for half an eternity. It was possible that none of the monks were even aware of this passageway.

“Go on, then!” Barbara urged, her voice tinged with excitement. “—Or should I lead the way?”

With his heart racing, Pete stepped into the passageway, sweeping aside the cobwebs with his hands. Jupiter and Barbara followed suit, switching on the lights on their mobile phones.

Just two metres into the straight passageway, the Second Investigator encountered a sudden left turn, and he pressed on. There were now rugged rock walls to the right and left. This meant that he was no longer in the confines of the library building... but in a rock tunnel behind it!

Another two metres on, Pete found himself in a cave. It was clear that the monastery's builders had intentionally constructed the library at the cave's entrance to cleverly conceal it. This location was indeed ideal for a secret vault!

Moments later, Jupe and Barbara joined him in the cave.

"This is thrilling!" Barbara whispered, her voice brimming with excitement.

The cave spanned about five by five metres, with a ceiling that arched overhead like a dome. At the highest point they could just about reach the ceiling with outstretched arms. The combined light from their mobile phones provided sufficient illumination for them to navigate the space, and their eyes gradually adjusted to the dimness.

At the far end of the cave stood a large chest crafted from dark wood, adorned with metal fittings. "It looks like an old pirate's treasure chest," Barbara commented.

"I wouldn't mind finding a pirate's treasure," said Pete with a grin.

Jupiter reached the chest first and checked the latch on the heavy lid. "It's unlocked," he noted. "Perhaps locking it wasn't necessary as the way in here was hidden well enough."

"—Until we picked up the trail," Pete added.

Jupe lifted the lid and Barbara directed her light inside. The interior was lined with thick red fabric. Positioned centrally were two or three leather-bound books, but what truly captured their attention was a golden disc resting atop the books. It was a round medallion, slightly larger than the palm of a hand. The light from the mobile phone reflected off its smooth surface.

Barbara reached in and took out the medallion. "Is it real gold? I can't say for certain, but it is remarkably heavy and stunningly beautiful."

"I noticed something when you were taking it out," Jupe said. "Turn the medallion over."

Barbara complied. The back featured several symbols engraved on its surface. They could recognize a sun at the top... and next to it—was it an eye that had been crossed out? Then there was a numeral '2' with an arrow pointing to the right; and below all of them were two other arrows and several wavy lines.

"You know what?" said Pete. "These symbols might be providing directions—like a treasure map—though their layout looks quite different from what we imagined. It's not a rolled-up parchment map with a red 'X' marking the spot."

"Perhaps this isn't the only clue here," Jupiter suggested. "We should examine the books more closely." The First Investigator carefully took the books out. There were two.

"Honoré de Balzac... Denis Diderot," he read aloud. "Yes... these authors had works that were partially banned in the past. They've been freely accessible for a long time now, as they no longer attract controversy. Fortunately, times have changed... Let's see if there's anything inside."

Jupiter handed Pete one of the books, and they flipped through the pages until Pete exclaimed, "There's something here!" He extracted a folded sheet of paper, thick and yellowed with age.

"What does it say?" Jupe asked excitedly. "Go on, read it!"

"It's a letter... in Spanish, dated '*primero de agosto de 1881*', with no signature."

"That's 1st August 1881—just two days before Leandro's letter saying that a 'set of directions' was brought to what we now believe is this very monastery!"

The First Investigator took the letter and quickly scanned through it. "I think I can read the Spanish here but later... let's check the chest first." He carefully refolded the letter, placed it back into the book, and handed both volumes to Barbara.

Jupiter and Pete then proceeded to inspect the chest for hidden compartments. They examined the thick red lining and turned the chest upside down to scrutinize the base. Their

search revealed nothing of significance.

“It appears that’s all there is,” Pete concluded.

Just then, a noise made Jupiter, Pete and Barbara turn around. Someone was coming through the tunnel into the cave. It was a man in the now familiar monk’s habit, and he was holding a flashlight.

“Well, well,” he said.

“Brother Luke?” asked Pete.

“No, but he will be here soon,” the monk said, “and I see that you have found the secret vault. Hard to believe, but great work! Now I need all of you to move away from that chest and stand against the wall back there.” The man then raised his right arm and pointed a gun at them!

Just then, a second monk came into the cave.

“Harry!” Barbara exclaimed angrily.

14. Locked in Complete Darkness

The two monks stood menacingly, and the raised weapon conveyed an unmistakable threat. Jupe, Pete, and Barbara were taken aback to discover these monks as their adversaries.

"You two boys stay by the wall," Luke ordered, "and you, Barbara, come here and hand over what you're holding."

In the dim light, Jupiter noticed Barbara clutching the medallion and two books. "But..." Jupe started to protest.

"I don't want to hear another word from you," the first monk interjected, raising his gun with a deliberate gesture. "Hand over everything you found... now!"

"Never!" Barbara retorted defiantly.

"Barbara," the First Investigator said calmly. "He's got a gun. You don't have a choice."

Luke chuckled. "Indeed. I also want all your mobile phones."

Reluctantly, they complied, gritting their teeth.

Luke collected the medallion and the books from Barbara, along with their mobile phones. He then rejoined the first monk, examining the items. "Excellent, excellent," he remarked, slipping the medallion into the pocket of his robe.

"We will proceed as follows," Luke continued. "My associate and I will leave now, closing the secret door behind us. Don't worry, we'll let someone know in a few hours and they'll get you out... and you can collect your mobile phones in the library. By that time, we will be far away, and we will not cross paths again. Then what should have transpired long ago will finally occur. We have the clues; you don't. Only we can find the Cities of Gold."

"—As if you understood the clues in the documents so well the first time," Jupiter mocked. "You followed us around because you didn't know what to do!"

"—And what benefit did we gain from following you? We were misled, going to that church!"

"—But now we're here, in your monastery. You were here the whole time, but you never found this secret vault. We had to do that for you."

"Thank you for your assistance," Luke replied sarcastically, "and now let's go."

The two men made their way back to the secret door. Shortly thereafter, Jupiter, Pete, and Barbara heard the door close with a rumble, plunging the cave into complete darkness.

"We have to get out of here!" Pete's voice quivered with urgency. The realization of being trapped in a secret vault, enveloped in darkness, accelerated his heartbeat. He quickly traced the wall to the cave entrance and squeezed back into the tunnel.

"Pete, wait!" Barbara called out, but the Second Investigator pressed on.

Pete felt his way out of the tunnel back into the passageway. Moments later, he reached the secret door and attempted to push it open, but he could not get a good grip on the rather smooth surface of the column.

"I can't move the column by myself!" Pete shouted. "Jupe! Come on!"

Despite exerting all his strength, his palms slid ineffectively against the column, leaving them sore and scratched. His breathing quickened, and bright flashes danced before his eyes, signalling the onset of faintness. It was then he realized that there was actually light—not

from outside, but from behind him. Turning, he saw Barbara, illuminated by the glow of a lighter!

"Stay calm," Jupiter advised, coming up behind Barbara. "We'll find a way out."

"How come you have a lighter?" Pete asked in astonishment.

"I put a few things in my pouch before we set off," she said, "including a lighter and a penknife. You guys have your investigation kit; I have my investigation pouch!"

"I mean, why would you even have a cigarette lighter in the first place?" Pete asked.

"It's a pipe lighter. My dad smokes, remember?"

"Any light source is good," said Pete, feeling more at ease now that they were no longer in darkness. "Still, we have to get out of here. The monastery is nearby, and if anyone is outside, they could hear us if we shout."

"You can definitely open the secret door from the inside," Jupiter explained. "Consider the practicality—a privileged monk would enter this secret vault, but others weren't supposed to know this entrance. So there has to be a way for him to lock the door from the inside and then reopen it. It makes sense."

"Here..." Barbara offered, "I'll hold the lighter for you to search for an opening mechanism."

"I feel really stupid," Pete admitted, "but I just panicked in the dark."

With the aid of Barbara's lighter, Pete quickly located what he was searching for. Approximately 40 centimetres from the bottom, a metal handle was embedded in the column. The Second Investigator grasped the handle and pulled. The door shifted slightly, and with considerable effort, he managed to slide the column along the tracks.

Moments later, all three of them were out of the passageway. They didn't even bother to close the secret door so as not to waste any time.

"We must hurry," urged the First Investigator. "It took us less than fifteen minutes to free ourselves. If the rogue monks haven't left the monastery, we might still catch them. Perhaps they're still packing."

"Hold on," Barbara interjected. "I've got to look for our phones!" She dashed into the library, and saw all three phones on the table. She quickly picked up her phone and began tapping on it.

Just then, Jupiter appeared in the library doorway. "Barbara!" he called out. "We don't have time. Just take all the phones. We've got to go after the two scoundrels!"

Barbara grabbed all the phones and then ran out.

At the main building, the side door they had used to exit earlier was locked, so they ran straight to the front entrance.

"I don't think we'll find them," Pete said when he looked down the track to the gravelled road. "My MG is parked down there... and there was a white van parked next to it earlier. It's gone now. They've probably made off with it."

"Possibly, but we have to make sure," said the First Investigator. He rapped the metal knocker at the door. The knocking echoed loudly.

This time the door was opened by the abbot himself. "You look excited," Sebastian said and waved them in. "Have you spoken to Brother Luke? I suppose he told you that there is no secret vault here... but you don't believe him and want to—"

"We need to speak to Brother Luke again," Jupiter interrupted as Sebastian closed the door behind them. "It's very urgent. Do you know where he is?"

"Oh, he's gone out again, but I don't know where. Jacob is accompanying him."

Jupiter wondered whether they could trust the abbot. Was he just covering something up? Did he really know exactly what had happened in the secret vault? At least he didn't seem

surprised that the three of them were free.

The First Investigator decided to take the risk. “What I’m about to say will surprise you... but I trust you. Firstly, we have found the secret vault. Secondly, Luke and Jacob are criminals. They were the ones who earlier kidnapped our friend here. Now, they have stolen something from the monastery and locked us up.”

“W-what?” the abbot gasped.

“Perhaps you’ll be convinced once we’ve shown you the secret vault,” said Jupiter. “Then you’ll know it exists and we’re telling the truth.”

The abbot hesitated briefly. Then he gave himself a jolt. “Yes... show it to me.”

After they got a few flashlights from a cupboard, Jupiter, Pete and Barbara led the astonished Father Sebastian to the former library building. There, they went through the secret door and the narrow passageway into the cave. Then they briefed the abbot on how they had found the secret vault, what they found, and what happened when the two rogue monks confronted them.

The abbot reiterated that he had had no idea of the existence of this secret vault. “—And my predecessor probably didn’t either,” he said, “but I can accept that more easily than the fact that two of my monks are supposed to have committed all these crimes! How could they do that?”

“If I’m deducing correctly,” said Jupiter, “the opportunity presented itself to them quite unexpectedly. I believe that it was through Stewart Patrick that they heard about Professor Mathewson’s research into the Cities of Gold. They were fascinated by what he had to say about the map and that set the ball rolling. For the two monks, the prospect of an immeasurable treasure was probably just too tempting. Perhaps Luke was also annoyed beyond measure that he hadn’t discovered the clues in the documents himself when he still had easy access to them. Ultimately, he wanted to find the Cities of Gold himself, by any means necessary.”

“Pure greed,” the abbot said snidely.

“He coerced me into stealing the documents for him,” Barbara said. “When that didn’t work, he kidnapped me—with this Jacob as his accomplice.”

“—And finally,” said Jupiter, “we all came together here in this cave. Now they have the medallion and the letter, and are probably on their way to get the treasure.”

“Where do you think it is located?” the abbot asked.

“We don’t know where it is—only that it must be somewhere on the North American continent,” Jupiter stated, “but who knows what the medallion clues lead to.”

The abbot sighed. “I am not sure what to do now. Anyway, I still have to deal with the two monks. Meanwhile, let’s go back outside.”

While they were walking back to the main building, a mobile phone rang in Barbara’s pocket. “Oops. I pocketed all your phones earlier. Hang on.” A few seconds later, she had the right phone in her hand. It belonged to the First Investigator. She answered the call. “Yes, Jupiter’s... Ah, it’s you; hang on, I’ll put you on the speakerphone.”

Bob’s voice rang out, “Jupe, have you started letting your secretary take your calls?”

“If you only knew... Where are you, Bob?”

“I’m back at the salvage yard.”

“Yeah, you might as well remain there,” said Jupiter. “We’re done here... It’s not good news. We found the secret vault and got hold of some clues—”

“You found the route map?” Bob interjected.

“We had something,” said Jupiter, “for about a minute, before Luke and Jacob stole it from us.”

“Who on earth are Luke and Jacob?”

“Harry and Oliver.”

15. Barbara Saves the Day

Jupiter, Pete and Barbara thanked the abbot for his help and his candour. Father Sebastian apologized for the incident and conveyed his dismay at the actions of the monks under his supervision. He extended an invitation to them to revisit the monastery before they relocated. They promised to get back to him if there were any developments in the case, though prospects seemed bleak.

“What a bummer!” Pete remarked when they were walking away from the monastery. “We had the clues on that medallion and the letter before the two rogue monks stole them. Jupe, do you recall any of the engravings on the medallion? I remember symbols like the sun, an eye, and some arrows. Perhaps with your photographic memory, we could reconstruct it.”

“I can remember only parts of it,” Jupiter admitted. “I didn’t have a chance to study it thoroughly in the dim light. Perhaps I should sketch what I can recall. Barbara, do you have a notepad and pen?”

“I have something even better,” Barbara replied, and took out her mobile phone. She tapped on it and held it up to the boys.

“What?” Pete exclaimed. “You took a photo of the medallion? When did you do that?”

“When you two were busy turning the chest upside down.”

“Oh my!” Pete continued.

“This is remarkable, Barbara,” Jupiter commended. “Now we are back in the game. Unfortunately, we don’t have the letter. Arrgh! I should have at least read it once before it was stolen.”

“Did you also take a photo of the letter?” Pete asked Barbara.

“No,” Barbara replied with a grin, “but I have something even better.” She then pulled out her pouch and opened it. Out came a piece of paper and she unfolded it—it was the 1st August letter!

“This is truly extraordinary!” Pete exclaimed. “Wha... what prompted you to keep the letter?”

“After taking the photo of the medallion, I decided to keep the letter in my pouch to prevent it from falling into the wrong hands. I told you that you guys should get a pouch like mine!”

“As I’ve always noted, you are always good for a surprise!” Pete remarked. “—But why didn’t you tell us about this earlier?”

“Firstly, I wasn’t sure if Luke had left our mobile phones in the library,” Barbara explained, “and secondly, I couldn’t be certain we could trust Father Sebastian.”

“Well done, Barbara!” Jupe praised. “How did you even think of taking all these precautions?”

“I learned from Bob,” Barbara replied with a smile. “Remember in the *Parchment Book* case what he did with the clue sheet we got from City Hall? All I can say is, ‘When Bob’s away, Barbara saves the day!’ You’d better get used to it.”

They all laughed as they got into the MG and Pete drove away.

On the way back, Jupiter took a look at the letter.

“What does it say?” Pete asked excitedly. “Go on, read it!”

“So... this letter is dated 1st August 1881—two days prior to the one indicating that Cabeza de Vaca’s descendants had brought a ‘set of directions’ to the monastery,” Jupiter recalled. “Okay, let’s see if I can translate it for you:

The legacy of our illustrious ancestor has burdened us long enough. Greed for wealth and power only brings misfortune. Dark figures are on our trail. We have therefore decided to destroy the map that Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca entrusted to his descendants so long ago. We have consigned it to the flames of fire.

Let no one discover the way to the Cities of Gold! May it remain hidden forever. However, our ancestor’s Cibola treasure remains intact. The directions to where it rests are on the medallion.

“The route map to Cibola has been destroyed?” Pete said disappointedly. “—But the letter written two days later says that the map still exists! How can that be?”

“I now know,” replied the First Investigator. “The 3rd August letter mentioned a ‘set of directions’ not a ‘map’. We had assumed that this ‘set of directions’ was the route map. Evidently it is not. Now we know that the directions are the engravings on the medallion!”

“—So they are directions to the ancestor’s Cibola treasure, not the Cibola cities!” Barbara exclaimed with unwavering optimism.

“That brings up the ‘old thing’ they got rid of,” Jupe continued. “Now, it is clear that it refers to the route map that has been ‘consigned to the flames of fire’.”

“In any case, the ancestor’s treasure could be gold as well,” Barbara said. “Regardless, we must reach the hiding place before those two scoundrels do.”

“We need to return to the salvage yard and decipher the clues on the medallion with Bob,” Jupe decided. He then contacted Bob to inform him of the latest developments.

When Pete drove into the salvage yard, Bob was waiting on the verandah of the yard office. He had prepared the outdoor coffee table and arranged four chairs there for their meeting.

They looked at the photos of the medallion. Now they had to understand the directions that Cabeza de Vaca’s descendants had made 150 years ago. The challenge lay in interpreting the symbols and lines—what they signified, and how they encoded the way to the hidden treasure.

“It all looks completely incomprehensible,” said Pete as they stared at the confusing symbols. “That’s probably a sun—but this is about all I can say for sure.”

“I initially thought the whole thing might represent a map,” said Jupiter. “North America, Central America—the regions Cabeza de Vaca traversed when he discovered the Cities of Gold. However, we now understand that it doesn’t pertain to Cibola itself.”

“It’s about locating a treasure,” Barbara added, “whatever it is.”

“In any case, the descendants obviously guarded it well,” remarked the First Investigator, thoughtfully pinching his lower lip. “According to the 1st August letter, they hid the treasure and then engraved the directions on the medallion which eventually ended up at the monastery’s secret vault. I deduce that the treasure was hidden nearby—perhaps not precisely there, but certainly not very far away. We mustn’t forget how long ago it was. Back then, it was more difficult to travel great distances than it is today.”

“—But I still can’t do anything with all these symbols and lines,” Pete admitted. “What is that next to the sun? Is it a crossed-out eye with a number ‘2’ and an arrow pointing to the right?”

“Wait a minute,” Bob interjected. He turned the photo so that the sun was positioned at the top. “Do you see this wavy line below the sun? There are two prominent peaks in the line. Jupe, based on your explanation, I’ve noticed something—Mount San Antonio has two peaks... and the sun shines above them.”

“Indeed!” Barbara exclaimed, snapping her fingers. “Perfect, Bob! That’s it! And here, the three wavy lines running diagonally from top left to bottom right... that represents water—quite a way below the peaks. Those are the San Antonio Falls!”

Pete leaned forward to get a better look. “You’re right. Once you understand it, it’s actually quite straightforward. I thought this might be a war or hunting arrow... but if the medallion shows a map of Mount San Antonio, it could be a directional arrow. Note that there is an arrow cutting across these three wavy lines. That could mean ‘go that way’ or ‘go past the waterfalls!’”

They scrutinized the engravings further, attempting to identify additional landscape features. Bob called up a map of the area around the San Antonio Falls on his mobile phone. The similarities were too significant to dismiss as mere coincidence.

“Going back to the first wavy line that seems to represent the peaks,” Pete said, “note that the arrow points in between the peaks. You know, I was preparing for a mountaineering tour last year but never got round to it. Bob, show me the map on your phone...” Pete examined it closely. “Yes, of course! The arrow points to the valley between the peaks. One of the hiking trails runs through there. The arrow points roughly...”—the Second Investigator let his index finger wander over Bob’s mobile phone before tapping—“... here!”

“—But that’s still a very large area,” Bob remarked. “We need another clue if we’re going to find anything there. Where could you hide something so that no one could find it for 150 years?”

“Somewhere out in the open?” asked Barbara. “I can’t think of anywhere... unless you bury it... but then you’d need an exact location to find it again... and that’s not in these directions... or is it?”

“What would you do,” asked Bob, “if you wanted to hide something?”

“I’d choose a secure location,” Barbara replied. “As I said, if it’s not buried, someone would eventually stumble across it in the wild. Well, I don’t mean literally stumble upon it, but simply see it... and if—”

“You’re brilliant,” Jupiter interjected.

“Thank you, that’s true,” Barbara acknowledged, “but why?”

“That’s precisely what’s engraved on the medallion,” Jupiter explained. “It says you can’t see it! The sun is shining, but there’s a crossed-out eye next to it. Although it’s as bright as day, you can’t see anything. Where could that be?”

“Somewhere like that secret vault we were locked in earlier and—” Pete broke off in mid-sentence. “Yes, of course—in a cave! Is there a cave near there?”

Bob checked the online map. “It’s a bit further than we thought. The trail leads past a small labyrinth of caves. There couldn’t be a better hiding place. However, the caves are marked with a warning on the map: ‘Access prohibited due to risk of collapse’.”

“I bet the treasure is in these caves,” Jupiter speculated. “Now, we have our next destination!”

“—And what does the number ‘2’ next to the crossed-out eye mean?” asked Pete, tapping the corresponding part of the medallion, “and the arrow pointing to the right?”

“We’ll figure that out on site,” Barbara said with conviction.

Jupiter nodded. “It looks like we’ll have to hike for about two hours from the car park where the trail starts... but that’s a sacrifice an investigator has to make, even in this heat...”

and we'd better hurry, because our two opponents might have also solved this puzzle."

16. Labyrinth of Caves

Jupe grabbed some bottles of water from the salvage yard office and the four of them set off. Pete and Barbara led the way in the MG, while Bob followed with Jupiter in the Beetle. Barbara navigated Pete to the starting point of the hiking trail.

“Turn right here and continue straight,” she instructed as they reached the end of a gravel road. “I wonder if the two rogue monks are headed here as well.”

“—But they don’t have the letter,” Pete added. “They should be thinking that the medallion directions point the way to the Cities of Gold... which certainly won’t be on Mount San Antonio.”

“Perhaps they suspect there’s another map hidden here,” Barbara speculated.

The two cars arrived at the car park just over an hour later. Two other cars were already parked there—neither of which was the white van or the Buick.

Their investigation kit was in Bob’s car. Unfortunately, they had only one backpack with them. Into it, they packed the water bottles and a few items they could use in a cave. With more time, they could have been better prepared, but at least they had a few flashlights and three sturdy ropes available, in case climbing was necessary.

Pete donned the backpack, and the four of them set off along the trail. The sun blazed relentlessly, and they were prepared for several hours of trekking in the heat.

Half an hour later, they took a short break in the shade of an overhanging rock. Despite the breathtaking view that stretched before them, their focus remained on reaching the caves as quickly as possible.

Upon arriving at the waterfalls and river, they relished the opportunity to cool off, dipping their hands and arms into the refreshing water. Pete even briefly stuck his head under the water.

Eventually, they arrived at the entrance to the labyrinth of caves, located just a few metres off the hiking trail. The entrance was secured with a gate and a rather rusty padlock, accompanied by a sign warning against unauthorized entry. Of course, they couldn’t let that stop them.

“You have your favourite set of tools?” Jupe asked Pete.

“Yes, as always,” Pete replied, “although looking at the state of the padlock, it would be faster for me to break it with a rock than to pick it... but it’s better not to destroy anything.”

The Second Investigator set to work and in under a minute, he had the padlock removed. Barbara grinned. “Let’s go in!”

“We must exercise caution inside,” Jupiter advised, clearing his throat. “It’s dangerous. We have to stay together so that we can help each other. No going it alone—especially you, Barbara.”

“Aye-aye, Captain!” Barbara responded and saluted like a soldier.

They switched on their flashlights and made their way into the darkness.

After just a few steps, a welcome change occurred—it became noticeably cooler. The tunnel extended straight ahead for several metres, initially wide enough for them to walk side by side, before narrowing into a tube-like tunnel. Pete took the lead, his flashlight beam

cutting through the darkness, illuminating small sections at a time. Every step had to be taken carefully to keep a firm footing on the uneven ground. Apart from the sound of their footsteps, it was completely silent.

As the tunnel widened again, the Second Investigator raised his hand to signal his friends to stop. "I hear something," he said. "Something's splashing." He directed his light further ahead and saw water dripping from the cave ceiling. However, it did not collect on the ground, but fell onto a large pile of stones and rubble. "Dead end," Pete said contritely. "The tunnel has collapsed..."

"We're not giving up," Jupiter said resolutely.

That was exactly what the Second Investigator thought—but could they really get any further? Rocks and stones were piled up high, leaving only a narrow gap to the uneven, cracked ceiling. It was impossible to determine how far the collapse extended into the tunnel.

Pete steadied himself, set down his backpack, and began climbing up the slope. With each step and handhold, he meticulously ensured the stability of the rocks, confirming they were secure and would not slip away. He needed both hands for the climb. "Shine me some light," he asked, switching off his own flashlight and putting it in his trouser pocket.

His friends directed their flashlights at the pile of rubble around Pete. The Second Investigator felt his heartbeat pounding with excitement. Cautiously, he continued his ascent. As he stepped on the next rock, it dislodged unexpectedly. "Watch out!" Pete exclaimed.

Several rocks then slid down, bounced off the slope, and landed with a resounding thud. The clattering of rocks reverberated loudly, echoing through the tunnel, causing Pete's heart to skip a beat. The Second Investigator envisioned the pile sliding and collapsing around him. He was petrified and breathed a sigh of relief when it calmed down and everything remained intact.

Pete felt his knees trembling slightly. He knew for sure—if he didn't keep going now, he wouldn't make it at all. He had to overcome his fear. "No unnecessary risks," he murmured, took a deep breath and reached for the next rocks that would provide a secure foothold. "Just a few more steps, then I can see whether we can go any further or if we remain stuck here."

Within less than a minute, he crouched atop the rubble. Carefully, Pete retrieved his flashlight from his pocket and switched it on, illuminating the darkness ahead.

"Good news!" he exclaimed. "We can go down the other side, and then the path will be clear. Follow me, slowly and one at a time. Can you manage that?"

"Sure," said Barbara, as confident as if she had been a cave explorer for years.

Bob secured the backpack. He carefully followed Barbara. Jupiter was the last to climb up.

After a quarter of an hour, everyone had navigated the collapse. Now Bob took the lead, and within two minutes, he halted abruptly.

"We have a new challenge," he announced. "This is where it begins." He shifted to his side, allowing his friends to see what he was alluding to—the tunnel diverged into two paths. "Right or left?" Bob posed.

"Right," Jupiter responded confidently.

"Oh, and what makes you so sure?" asked Barbara.

"I'm using my reasoning," replied the First Investigator with composure. "Recall the engravings on the medallion? Cabeza de Vaca's descendants intended for the treasure to be discovered, and they engraved all necessary directions on the medallion."

"Indeed," Bob agreed. "The crossed-out eye indicated the cave, and adjacent to it was first a number '2' and then an arrow pointing to the right."

“—Which likely suggests we should go right twice when faced with options,” Jupiter added. “We have to at least try that. Besides, it will be easier to remember our route this way. We cannot afford to get lost under any circumstances.”

“Just to be sure...” Bob said and took out from his pocket, a green chalk. “—I’ll mark the way.” He then promptly drew an inconspicuous question mark at the entrance to the right-side tunnel.

They pressed on and soon arrived at a small cave, scarcely larger than the monastery’s secret vault. There were also two ways to continue from there—and again, they chose the right fork.

However, the tunnel ended after a few steps.

“Goodness,” Jupiter remarked. “I might have misinterpreted the symbols on the medallion.”

Pete walked up to the rock face where the tunnel ended. He shone his light all around—and whistled through his teeth as he pointed the light upwards.

“There’s more to it, Jupe,” he noted, pointing upwards. “—Just not that easy, because now we have to climb up.” The tunnel extended vertically up like a chimney. It was a vertical shaft, and after about three metres, the rock appeared to open up to one side.

“Whatever the treasure may be,” Bob said, “Cabeza de Vaca’s descendants have hidden it well.”

“Hmm...” Pete mumbled. “Nobody said it was going to be a walk in the park. At least everything looks stable here—I hope!”

“—And how are we supposed to get up there?” asked Jupiter.

“I think it’s about three metres,” said Pete. “Bob, hand me the backpack. If you hoist me on your shoulders, I’ll manage. Then I’ll secure a rope from the top and help you up.”

Shortly thereafter, Bob crouched down, allowing the Second Investigator to climb onto his shoulders. “Just a little more!” Pete said.

Bob strained as he pushed himself upwards with a groan, supported by Jupiter. Barbara illuminated the area with her flashlight.

Pete finally managed to grasp the top edge of the vertical shaft, pulling himself up further and relieving his friend of the weight. He soon managed to heave himself over the edge.

The Second Investigator removed the backpack, retrieved his own flashlight, and shone it all round. “Another cave,” he announced. “It’s about twice the size of the previous one. Absolutely remarkable here.”

“Help us up!” Barbara demanded impatiently.

Pete took a rope out of his backpack and searched for a suitable anchor point. He identified a nearby stalagmite that appeared stable. Securing the rope around the rock formation, he allowed the other end to dangle down.

Jupe ascended first. Being the heaviest, it provided a good test for how securely the rope was fastened. Barbara and Bob followed in succession, with Pete assisting all of them over the edge.

This cave stretched further than Pete had initially assumed. However, after just a few metres, the ceiling sank so low that it was impossible to stand. The stalactites hanging from above and the stalagmites rising from the ground created an intricate and unusual pattern. Large sections of the cave were inaccessible due to the dense arrangement of stalactites. Fortunately, these formations grew so slowly that it must have looked the same 150 years ago when Cabeza de Vaca’s descendants hid the treasure here. Areas that are unreachable now were equally inaccessible then.

“It must be here somewhere,” Barbara said excitedly. “Let’s start looking for the treasure!”

17. The Treasure of Cabeza de Vaca

The Three Investigators and Barbara began to search.

"We'll recognize treasure when we see it," Pete remarked, "that is, if we find anything."

"So far, it's all rocks," said Barbara.

"—Or rubble," added Bob.

"Rocks," Pete spoke up. "Rubble... gravel... stones... pebbles..."

"Now shut up!" demanded the First Investigator. "I can't think straight with all that chatter."

Pete briefly considered whether he should add a few more synonyms to continue annoying Jupiter, but decided against it and, like the others, began to look around.

Bob saw the beams of his friends' flashlights darting through the darkness. He carefully squeezed his way between some stalactites and got down on all fours to move on. The ceiling here was about a metre high. Was there something up ahead, at the edge of his light beam? Could it perhaps be a chest? Because that was exactly what he imagined the treasure to be—a chest full of gold, which raised the question of how Cabeza de Vaca's descendants were supposed to have dragged the treasure through the tunnels and up the vertical shaft.

The hoped-for chest turned out to be a large cuboidal rock, behind which the cave narrowed considerably and extended into a tunnel. At least Bob was able to stand up again. He carefully felt his way forwards. The voices of his friends remained behind. He would not go so far that he could no longer hear them.

Moments later, Bob thought he saw something unusual in the beam of his flashlight. He was just about to call the others to him when he heard a voice that made him freeze.

"None of you move!" That was raspy-voiced Luke, and not a second later, a second person's laughter rang out.

"We have a gun," said Jacob, "and after all this trouble, you shouldn't be getting on our nerves."

Bob immediately switched off his flashlight. Perhaps the two monks hadn't noticed him yet. He scurried in the darkness back to the cuboidal rock. Only from here did some illumination from his friends' flashlights reach him.

"What have you found?" asked Luke.

"What are we supposed to have found?" asked Jupiter. "The Seven Cities of Gold? Here?"

"Don't take me for a fool!" the monk yelled at the First Investigator. "You found your way into these caves."

"You know what?" Jupiter said. "It seems to me that you are always following us to get to places. Couldn't you solve any of the clues?"

"I have news for you, buddy," Luke said. "It's not a matter of who follows who. It's about who gets to the end... and from the looks of it, it's us."

"How did you even manage to track us here?" Pete asked.

"You think we did not notice when you set us up to follow that ramshackle pick-up truck?" Luke said with a smirk. "What we did was to plant another bug on your car when you were parked at the monastery."

“Aha!” Jupe remarked. “Our mistake, then... We should have checked again.”

“We weren’t that far behind you,” Luke continued. “We could see you by the pile of rubble, but we just kept quiet. We know you’ll lead us to something, and that’s exactly what happened.”

“—Except there’s nothing here,” said Barbara. “Just a pile of stones. Maybe someone has long since found what was once hidden here.”

“Nonsense! That would have become public knowledge and—”

“Luke!” Jacob interrupted his accomplice. “There are only three of them here!”

“Oooh... so you can count!” It was Barbara’s turn to mock the rogue monks.

“Shut up!” Jacob barked. “Where’s the other guy?”

Bob flinched in his hiding place.

“There are only three of us the whole time—Pete, Barbara and me,” Jupiter lied without hesitation. “If you were watching us, you must have noticed. Bob didn’t come with us. Instead, he’s still in the city with someone who knows about caves, and—”

“You’re lying,” hissed Jacob. “There were four of you!”

“You were imagining things,” said the First Investigator. “That’s typical when you expect something specific... then you see what you expect to see.”

“Nonsense,” said Luke, but he no longer sounded entirely convinced. He was probably wondering whether he should believe Jupiter.

“He’s lying, Luke,” Jacob reiterated. “We saw two cars parked outside.”

“That’s where you got it wrong,” Pete said. “Remember the pick-up truck you happily followed to Santa Ana? Bob’s using that to bring some equipment here for—”

“Quiet, Pete!” Jupe warned. “Don’t say anything more!” He played along in an exemplary manner.

Bob was amazed at the naturalness and persuasiveness with which his friends improvised to mislead their opponents... but how could he take advantage of the situation? Should he set a trap for the monks? Disarm and overpower them because they weren’t expecting him?

He cautiously peered past the edge of the boulder. Jupiter, Pete and Barbara were standing far away from the vertical shaft. The two monks, who had obviously also used the rope to come up, were now standing in front of the three of them. Bob could also see the gun that the monk was pointing at his friends.

He figured that his best bet was to make a dash for the shaft. Then, should he go and get help? But it would take far too long for him to go outside the cave where there was mobile phone reception to contact the police.

He looked round carefully. The monks had their backs to him, and there were just about eight metres between him and the shaft. There was a formation of stalagmites about halfway down that could provide him with cover.

Bob scurried off, crouched and silent. Jupiter, Pete and Barbara should now be able to see him. All he could do now was to remain crouched down, and wait for the right opportunity to act.

“Listen,” said Pete, “we don’t know what exactly is supposed to be hidden here. We think there must be a map somewhere that shows the way to the Cities of Gold.” That was yet another lie, of course, but there was no reason to tell their opponents about what they knew from the 1st August letter. “—But I’m afraid we’ve misinterpreted a clue on the medallion.”

“How could you even remember all the symbols on the medallion so clearly?” asked Luke.

“We couldn’t,” Jupiter said. “We only remembered a few symbols, and we took a chance to come here. For all you know, we may have come to the wrong place—and so did you,

since you have a habit of following us.” Of course, it was a wild mix of half-truths... but for the moment, it was enough to confuse the two monks.

“I’m not convinced by your explanation,” Luke said. “In any case, we have to take care of your other buddy. Jacob, you go down and wait for the other guy, and bring him here.”

“Then, what are we going to do with them?” asked Jacob.

“We’ll tie them up so that we can go find whatever there is to find.”

Jacob went to the rope, checked that it was secure and slowly let himself down the shaft.

“You brats should have given it a rest in the secret vault,” Luke continued. “Here in this cave it will be far more uncomfortable... but don’t worry, we’re not brutes. We’ll send someone to get you out—tomorrow sometime... the day after tomorrow at the latest... when Jacob and I are long gone.”

“No! You can’t leave us in here!” Barbara suddenly yelled. “I’m scared!” She started screaming, threw her arms around frantically, and looked completely hysterical.

Luke’s attention turned to her. Jacob was already going down the shaft. Barbara’s screams reverberated off the cave walls, bouncing back and forth, creating a cacophony that drowned out everything.

Bob knew exactly what was happening—this was an antic Barbara used to help both of them escape from the comic book warehouse in the *Feathered Fiend* case when they were confronted by a man with a gun. Right now, Bob knew that this was the opportunity for him to act.

He jumped out from his cover, ran towards Luke, and with all his strength, tackled the rogue monk from behind. Luke lost his footing and fell. At the same time, the gun flew off his hand onto the ground. Bob then threw himself on top of Luke.

“Hold him!” the Second Investigator shouted to his friends and ran to the shaft.

Jacob was halfway down, dangling from the rope. “What—” he looked up and uttered in surprise.

Without hesitation, Pete jumped down the shaft and crashed into the monk, who lost his hold on the rope from the sudden blow. Together they fell the remaining metre and a half. The Second Investigator landed on the monk, who fell so awkwardly that he hit his head, groaned and lay motionless. Startled, Pete felt for Jacob’s pulse, which fortunately was beating regularly. It was probably a brief spell of dizziness.

“Are you all right?” Pete called up to his friends.

Barbara’s head appeared at the top of the shaft. “Mission accomplished! We’ve got Luke; he can’t move.”

Pete took the two remaining ropes out of his backpack. He threw one up to Barbara and used the other to tie up the motionless Jacob before climbing back up. By now, Luke was also tied up so tightly that it would be impossible for him to free himself without help.

“As you were so nice to us earlier, we will return the favour,” Jupiter said. “Here in the cave it will be a bit uncomfortable... but don’t worry, we’re not brutes. We’ll send the police to get you out—tomorrow sometime... the day after tomorrow at the latest... when the four of us are long gone.”

Despite the First Investigator returning Luke’s threat and taunt in kind, Bob nonetheless volunteered to call the police immediately. He made his way through the maze of tunnels and out of the caves. As soon as he had mobile phone reception, he called Inspector Cotta.

Meanwhile, Jupiter, Pete and Barbara continued their search for the treasure. Bob had shown them the cave extension he had discovered beyond the large cuboidal rock, and the three of them ventured in. Only about three metres from where Bob had turned back, something shone in the beams of their flashlights.

Their excitement was palpable as right in front of them was a large clay pot with a wooden lid. Barbara's heart raced with anticipation as she bent down, carefully brushing away the dirt from the lid before lifting it.

Inside, they first discovered intricately designed gold vessels, including ornate bowls and goblets. This was followed by figurines and an array of jewellery, such as gold amulets, sequins, and ear ornaments.

"Wait till Dad hears this!" Barbara said. "It doesn't look like Cabeza de Vaca only found cornfields back then..."

"A truly worthy treasure from centuries past," said Jupiter. "It definitely belongs in a museum."

Although more items lay beneath, further examination was deemed unnecessary. Those that they took out were meticulously returned to the pot. Then they went back to Luke, who was lying on the ground in his shackles.

"What have you found?" asked the monk.

"I'll be happy to tell you if you answer a question."

"Why should I say anything?" Luke countered.

"Suit yourself," Jupiter said. "I will eventually get my answers from the police."

"Jupe, guess what?" Pete called out. "This guy is a complete fraud. His gun is a dummy!"

At that moment, noises came up the shaft. Bob returned. "I've got through to the police. They're sending a helicopter!"

When Barbara was out of the cave, she immediately called her father and told him about what had happened. Nicolas Mathewson was stunned by the fact that there must have been real wealth from Cibola—treasures that Cabeza de Vaca had taken from there and left to his descendants.

"It raises so many questions," he said on the phone, "that I'm sure I have to deal with it for weeks—I mean, for months!" He sounded audibly excited.

18. All's Well That Ends Well

A few days later, The Three Investigators and Barbara honoured their promise and visited the monastery again to meet the abbot, Father Sebastian.

After the police had arrested the two rogue monks in the cave, Luke and Jacob had been subjected to a thorough interrogation at the police department. Father Sebastian was also there to give his statement. In the end, the two scoundrels had surrendered the medallion, the two books, and all the university's documents.

There were some loose ends in the case, however, and Bob was hoping that the abbot could clarify them for the case report.

"How did the two monks come to commit such crimes?" Bob asked the abbot.

Father Sebastian explained, "As Jupiter had deduced earlier, it began when they heard from Stewart Patrick about Professor Mathewson's research. Luke and Jacob were convinced that the professor was on the verge of finding the cities, and they were determined to beat him to it. With all that gold, they could have lived in luxury forever.

"They thought all they had to do was get the documents... but things took on a life of their own. When Barbara ran off with the stuff, it completely messed up their plans. One thing led to another and they had to keep reacting."

"Ha!" Jupiter exclaimed. "They acted like professional criminals, not like monks who shouldn't be concerned about things like extortion... kidnapping... tracking devices—"

"—And car theft," the abbot added, "because they stole the silver Buick they used for the kidnapping... and then left it somewhere. In any case, Luke admitted that he loved reading crime novels as they taught him a lot, for example, how to be a tough negotiator on the phone."

"He admitted that?" Barbara remarked.

"Yes," Father Sebastian replied. "Both of them revealed everything during the police interrogation."

"What is going to happen to them?" Barbara continued. "Their case now falls under secular law... but what action is your monastery taking?"

"You're right about the secular law, Barbara," the abbot replied. "In addition, they will have to face the internal law of our religious order. The ultimate penalty is expulsion from the monastery and dismissal from the clerical state. However, that will have to wait until after the court passes judgement... Anyway, Barbara... have you settled the document issue with your father?"

"Sure," Barbara said. "He understood why I did that, although he said he would have appreciated it more had I told him outright from the start. All's well that ends well! At least now, he can refer to me as 'his daughter, the treasure finder' and not as a thief!"

"So what was his reaction to the treasure?"

"Oh, he's buzzing with excitement, for sure!" Barbara said. "A few days ago, I sent him the digital photos of the medallion and the letter we found here in the secret vault. I just spoke with him this morning. He's coming back from Vancouver tomorrow. Already, he's looking into the newly found items and busy answering questions about them as he is a

principal researcher on this subject. He had been leaning towards no treasure, but this discovery gives his research a new twist.

“Being a researcher, my dad was cautious not to jump to conclusions. The letter and the medallion seem to indicate that the treasure was hidden in the cave by the descendants of Cabeza de Vaca. However, the question remains as to where the treasure actually came from. In all likelihood, they were looted from somewhere... but where?”

“My dad told me that even though the items might eventually be proven to come from the 16th century, they might not be from some cities of gold because at that time, when the conquistadors found treasures anywhere—especially Central and South America—they would just grab them. There is a distinct possibility that all this was a ploy by someone—perhaps even Cabeza de Vaca himself—to deceive the people of the day that there was indeed a place called Cibola. The type, design and metallurgical properties of the items might just tell, so there is a lot of work to do. Anyway, this will keep my dad very busy for a long time.”

“That would mean that he would not have much time to keep you out of trouble,” Jupiter quipped.

“That suits me fine!” Barbara countered.

“For your information, Father Sebastian,” Pete took over, “an initial estimate has been made of the treasure. The material value of the gold alone is almost a million dollars—but as they are also very old, and historically significant, the value could go a lot higher.”

“There is one other thing...” Jupiter continued. “In California, historically significant items found on state land are generally considered state property. However, specific legal frameworks require relevant authorities to undertake a series of procedures, including the identification of ‘rightful owners’ in certain cultural contexts. Legal title remains with the rightful owners or their heirs—if they could be identified or found.

“However, a basic principle in many legal systems is that looters or their descendants have no legal right to stolen property. That might mean that it is not necessary to track down Cabeza de Vaca’s descendants—which is just as well because Barbara’s father has already tried to do that without success.

“Unclaimed looted treasure usually becomes the property of the state in whose jurisdiction it is found or held. In such a case, items of historical significance could eventually be transferred to a state-recognized repository, such as a state-run museum or a university museum.”

“The good news is that the University of Los Angeles will be involved,” Barbara added, “with my dad and a couple of archaeologists serving as representatives in collaboration with a museum.”

“If everything proceeds smoothly,” Bob said, “the museum will assume custody of the items. They will then be responsible for the long-term preservation, research, and public exhibition of the artefacts. Although it is still early, there is an indication that the museum may offer a modest reward for the discovery.”

“We are hopeful for this outcome,” Jupe continued, “because we have decided that any reward we receive will be donated to your monastery. We hope this contribution will support your plans.”

This left the abbot speechless. “That’s... well... what can I say?”

“That’s just the way they are,” said Barbara. “That’s why I liked The Three Investigators—from the very first moment!”

Shortly afterwards, The Three Investigators and Barbara said goodbye to the abbot and made their way to Pete's car.

"Another case completed!" Bob remarked.

"So, have you got enough for your case report?" Barbara asked.

"Yeah, I guess so."

"What are you going to name this case?"

"Hmm... I haven't thought of it yet, but... *The Mystery of the Cities of Gold* might just be it."

"To be more precise," Barbara said, "it should be 'The Three Investigators and Barbara Mathewson in *The Mystery of the Cities of Gold*'!"

The three boys exchanged glances. At least she did not suggest calling themselves 'The Four Investigators'!